

Heini Laakso

HOW TO SPOT A CHRISTIAN

Asylum seekers' religious conversions in Finnish media

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ABSTRACT

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Supervisor: Valtteri Vähä-Savo
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Along with the increase of forced migration in Europe in the late 2010s, Finland has become a country where tens of thousands of people have sought asylum. The unexpected number of asylum seekers has sparked various public reactions, one of them being the worry of how to evaluate the need for international protection when asylum is sought based on grounds that are difficult to prove, such as religious conviction or sexual orientation. Meanwhile, approximately one thousand asylum seekers have converted from Islam to Christianity and sought international protection based on religious persecution that they would face in their countries of origins due to their new Christian conviction. The conversions have gained wide media attention with the key questions circulating around expertise and who has the best knowledge to assess one's religious conviction.

This study pays attention to the media discussion around asylum seekers who have converted to Christianity in Finland. The main purpose of this study is to analyze how religious conversion amongst asylum seekers is framed in Finnish news articles, and special attention will be put on the construction of authority concerning the topic. Theoretically this study draws on the tradition of governmentality with the particular focus on epistemic governance and ontological authority. Ontological authority offers a tool to scrutinize the picture of reality of the phenomenon constructed by experts. Methodologically this study is based on frame analysis. The data consists of news articles that deal with religious conversions amongst asylum seekers in 14 Finnish news outlets with altogether 67 news articles over the period of 2015–2019.

Three frames were found regarding the news reporting of converted asylum seekers: threatening conversion frame, authority frame and morality frame. Threatening conversion frame illustrates the converted asylum seekers as a substantially untrustworthy group of people that shake the national order by insincere behavior and by causing economic burden. Authority frame depicts the conversion as a conflict between experts and diminishes the agency of asylum seekers: on the one hand, there is a conflict between the state and the church and on the other hand, the Christian churches debate with each other about the best practices regarding the assessment of conversion. Morality frame highlights the converted asylum seekers as a group of victims who need to be encountered through humanitarian values.

One of the key findings of this study is the constant requirement for better credibility assessment practices that both the Finnish Immigration Service and church officials emphasize in the news articles. Even though they had different motives and methods for finding out the true religious conviction, they both shared the idea of finding the 'truth' about inner conviction and therefore about asylum seekers' true identity. Religious leaders and church representatives highlight their knowledge on two main grounds: personal and educational knowledge, whereas Finnish Immigration Service emphasizes their knowledge that they produce themselves: for example reports, statistics and precedents. These two main authorities do not share the ontological premises on how to assess religious conversion which depicts the entire discussion as a never-ending authoritative conflict between a nation-state and a church where asylum seekers themselves play a side role.

Keywords: asylum seekers, news media, religious conversion, frame analysis, epistemic governance, ontological authority

The originality of this thesis has been checked using the Turnitin Originality Check service.

List of Abbreviations

AL – Aamulehti
CEAS – Common European Asylum System
EASO – European Asylum Support Office
FEC – Finnish Ecumenical Council
HS – Helsingin Sanomat
IL – Iltalehti
KAL – Kaleva
KAR – Karjalainen
KES – Keskisuomalainen
KHO – Korkein hallinto-oikeus
LK – Lapin Kansa
LS – Länsi-Suomi
LU – Lappeenrannan Uutiset
Migri – Finnish Immigration Service
MP – member of parliament
MT – Maaseudun Tulevaisuus
NGO – non-governmental organization
RSD – refugee status determination
SAC – Supreme Administrative Court
SK – Satakunnan Kansa
SS – Savon Sanomat
TS – Turun Sanomat
UNHCR – United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees
YLE – Yle Uutiset

Contents

1	Introduction.....	1
2	Governing migration.....	6
2.1	Bordering practices	6
2.2	Migration and epistemic governance	11
2.3	Media and authority	16
3	Background.....	18
3.1	Defining migration.....	18
3.2	Finland, migration and religion.....	21
3.3	Religious conversion and credibility assessment.....	28
3.4	News media, asylum seekers and religion	34
4	Method and data.....	38
4.1	Frames and framing	38
4.2	Frame analysis and news framing.....	40
4.3	Data set.....	45
4.3.1	General features	45
4.3.2	The phases of reporting in 2015–2019.....	47
5	Findings.....	50
5.1	Threatening conversion.....	51
5.1.1	Sincerity	52
5.1.2	Economic burden	58
5.2	Authority frame.....	60
5.2.1	State vs. religion.....	62
5.2.2	Lutheranism vs. Charismatic movement.....	68
5.3	Morality frame	72
5.3.1	Helping the victims	72
5.3.2	Religious freedom as a human right	76
6	Discussion	79
	References.....	86
	Annex: Data	99

1 Introduction

Shock is more than a cognitive experience. Imagine living your life and discovering that many people who have never met you think they know a great deal about you, and what they know about you is not what you know about yourself – it is, in fact, the diametrical opposite. (Gitlin 1980, xv.)

The last five years have been exceptional in terms of the expansion of forced migration to Finland. The number of refugees and asylum seekers has multiplied and the public discussion about Finland as a recipient country has been intense, and the influx of forced migrants has become a predominant theme in the political agendas of countries in the European Union. The discussion around the coordination of the rapid increase in human migration has caused disagreement amongst the EU states and has coloured all kind of political discussion all the way from national plenaries to Twitter threads. Bordering policies and practices have tightened all over in Europe, and new barriers for controlling unwanted mobility have been invented (Hobolth 2012; Mau 2010). Following the political debates, disputations around ‘multiculturalism’ and Finland’s capacity to receive asylum seekers have provoked especially right-wing populist parties and promoted their agendas against immigration. “Welfare refugees”, “bogus asylum seekers” and other often xenophobic anti-immigration rhetoric has spread in public discussion platforms. Especially for many European radical-right parties anti-immigration policies have been in the core of their agendas. Regardless of the radical-right wing parties generally not being single-issue parties (Mudde 1999), immigration has often been intertwined with other political questions such as security, state expenditure and unemployment (Skenderovic 2007). Some authors even suggest that anti-immigration is a feature that eventually unites all radical-right parties (Brug et al. 2005).

Finland’s asylum policy has traditionally been following other Nordic countries and been relatively liberal. However, as there have been some widespread changes in European asylum policies, Finland has also reconsidered its policies on how to tackle irregular migration. While labour migration policies have liberated and introduction of temporary protection has been successful, the actual control mechanisms have become more restrictive between 1980s and 2010s (Helbling & Kalkum 2018, 1787–88). At the same time economic language and concerns related to the asylum costs have started to get more space in Finland’s immigration policy (Keskinen 2016). The use of stricter control mechanisms and discussing asylum seekers as an economic issue has started to portray asylum seekers more of a burden – not as a group of vulnerable people seeking for protection.

Politicians, Ministry of the Interior and Finnish Immigration Service have tried to find different administrative solutions for coping with the new transnational human mobility while asylum seekers have tried to receive international protection. One of the latest policy trends in the latter half of 2010s relating to asylum seeking procedure in Finland is about weakening the legal protection of asylum seekers during the asylum process. For example, the right to appeal against a negative asylum decision was made more challenging by shortening the appeal time from 30 to 21 days in 2016. Also, the right to have a legal assistant in the oral hearing was narrowed. These amendments were conducted by prime minister Juha Sipilä's government and were widely criticized by legal professionals and judges (Talouselämä 12.12.2018; Valtioneuvoston selvitys- ja tutkimustoiminta 2018). Also, a citizen's initiative for securing the legal aid was established (Kansalaisaloite 2018). A Member of Parliament, Aila Paloniemi (The Centre Party), made a written question (KK 223/2018 vp) for the parliament about the legal protection of asylum seekers regarding the reform of the Alien Law (646/2016). The tightening of asylum policies did not take place only in legal matters but also in immigration officials' interpretations and practices. For example, Finnish Immigration Service tightened up the criteria for granting an asylum for 18–34 years old Iraqi asylum seekers between 2015 and 2017, so that the claims for receiving international protection in 2017 were systematically stricter than in 2015 regardless of the similarity in applications (Saarikkomäki et al. 2018).

A right to move from country to another is one of the key principles in the European Union. It is widely seen as a basic right, and free transnational mobility has somehow become an elemental part of the general European identity. However, the idea of free movement is highly exclusionist and not targeted to everyone. Free movement is an option for only those who belong to the certain imagined European community, and who juridically belong to the nation-states of European Union. Finland as well is one imagined community (Anderson 2006) where the distinctions between “us” as in the ones who are eligible for moving around, and “them”, the ones who are excluded from the sphere of this community is constantly constructed. “We” are something familiar and wanted, whereas “them” is something that should stay away – by making stricter laws if there is no other way. Imagined community discursively and practically excludes the unwanted members and creates a concrete system that prohibits certain people entering the sphere of the community of a nation. These distinctions are constructed, represented and reinforced through policies and especially media.

Media has been covering asylum seekers in various ways since 2015. Certain concepts such as “European migrant crisis” and “European refugee crisis”¹ have rooted themselves as seemingly neutral attributes to describe the sudden arrivals of asylum seekers in 2015. The mediatized discourse of crisis has categorized asylum seekers and refugees as one homogenous group that somehow has an unbalancing effect on the stable European societies (Kyriakides 2017). Concerns regarding “influx” of asylum seekers, “floods” of refugees and “sneaking” groups of people have coloured the portrayal of forced migrants in news media (Gabrielatos & Baker 2008; Horsti 2006). General words depicting judicial status of migrants such as “asylum seeker” and “refugee” have also started to include more loaded connotations (Goodman et al. 2017).

The public discussion around asylum seekers and refugees often tends to follow debates concerning asylum seekers’ behaviour and features, and whether they are “enough” for granting asylum and truly deserve international protection. In the past few years, there has been a public dispute around the features that cannot be properly measured in the asylum hearing but still affect the asylum decision (Suomen Kuvalehti 11.10.2018; Iltalehti 2.9.2017). For example, asylum seeker’s religious conviction or sexual orientation can affect the asylum decision if they come from the country where there is a risk for persecution (Finnish Immigration Service 2020a). It has eventually opened up an entire new discussion around the question of how to measure the deservingness if the grounds represented for seeking asylum are not easily evaluated.

One reason for the increased public interest towards Finnish Immigration Service’s methods on assessing certain features of asylum seekers can be traced back to religious conversions that have taken place amongst asylum seekers. Most of the asylum seekers who arrived Finland in 2015 came from Middle Eastern countries where Islam is widely practiced. However, there has been a growing trend of Muslim asylum seekers converting to Christianity in Finland, and the new Christian conviction being used as a ground for seeking asylum (Finnish Immigration Service 12.6.2017). The phenomenon has not occurred only in Finland but all over in Europe (Independent Co. UK 15.5.2017; The Telegraph 5.6.2016).

¹ The term “refugee crisis” has not achieved a consensus amongst migration scholars and is not a free of the negative connotation as the concept itself includes an idea of a crisis. One way of using this concept is by assuming that it was not the asylum seekers and refugees that caused the crisis but more of the governments of the recipient countries that could not handle the new societal situation. I will follow this idea in my thesis and diminish the role of asylum seekers causing the crisis.

Religious conversion in this context is a special phenomenon and has not happened before, and there is no study about how the religious conversion has been discussed in so-called secular Finnish news media before. Hartikainen (2019) has approached the media portrayal of converted asylum seekers by analysing news articles of a religious newspaper, *Kirkko ja kaupunki*, which is an important channel for Christian news reporting in Finland. However, there has not been an extensive, nationwide media analysis on the matter. My pre-assumption lies in the idea that the asylum-seeking status affects the public discourse and the way of discussing about the conversion more than for example the religious conversion as a religious phenomenon or personal experience.

In this thesis, I will examine on how media frames Muslim asylum seekers who convert to Christianity in Finland. I am interested in the ways on how the biggest national Finnish news outlets discuss asylum seekers' religious conversion and how religious conversion is portrayed as a phenomenon. Converting to another religion is usually a significant turning point in a person's life and the reasons behind Muslims converting to Christianity vary considerably. In this thesis, I will not focus on the motives that lead asylum seekers converting to Christianity. Instead, I will focus on how reporters and journalists write, portray and describe religious conversion amongst asylum seekers. I am especially interested in the experts that are being interviewed on the matter by the media: who are chosen to be interviewed as "experts" regarding inner conviction in the case of asylum seekers? Who is given the authority to define the right way of looking at the phenomenon?

I have three main motivators for this thesis. In 2015 when over 30 000 asylum seekers crossed the borders of Finland, the migration happened so quickly that it seemed to be difficult to make sense of it to anyone. Basic questions like who these people are, where do they come from and for what reason were asked. Also, their assumed religious background got public attention as majority of the asylum seekers arrived from Muslim countries. Finland is a relatively secular country and religion is often considered as a more personal than a public issue, but the discussion that started about asylum seekers' religious background and whether it should affect asylum decision or not sparked also new debates about the role of religion in Finland. Some right-wing politicians even suggested that Finland should prefer asylum seekers with Christian conviction (Savon Sanomat 3.9.2015). Whereas asylum seekers and refugees in Finland have been increasingly under research after 2015 (Lyytinen 2019, 26), media portrayals of religion and especially religious conversion amongst asylum seekers in Finland has been studied very little. Thus, through media analysis in this thesis, I hope to open up some new perspectives on how media represented the 2015 migrant movement in Finland and one phenomenon, religious conversion, connected to it.

Second, religious conversion as a social phenomenon is inextricably connected to some core questions in sociology of knowledge and epistemology. What can we know of one's inner conviction? How can one assess inner conviction through scientific means, and who has the right to do so? What is the framework for assessing religious conviction and what are the highest and the lowest scores? In this thesis, I will not look at the actual practices that are being used for evaluating one's inner conviction – my focus lies in the discussions that take place in media regarding expertise and ontological authority. I am interested in the ways how different authorities construct their expertise and argue on behalf of their knowledge. Third, questions about assessing one's religious conviction are also related to power where lies my final interest. Who makes the rules on how to assess the credibility of inner conviction? Who wants to know the 'real', measurable religious faith? Why does it matter and who benefits of this knowledge? Also, again, what kind of arena does media offer for the discussions around credibility assessment?

In order to organize my interests into a thesis, my research question is two-folded: at the same time, I want to find out **the frames that occur in the news reporting about the converts but also the ontological authority that is being produced**. Frames have an effect on people's conceptions on events and construct the understanding of actors included. The empirical part of my thesis is based on the analysis of 67 Finnish news articles of 14 different national news outlets that have been chosen in order to cover the Finnish news media environment extensively. The data set can be seen as a sample of a mass communication data as the members of the imagined audience are not part of any certain group, subculture or societal class but are more of a big group of individuals on a certain geographical area (Kunelius 2003, 18). However, all the articles are published in Finland and are therefore presumably targeted to Finnish-speaking audience.

The structure of this thesis goes as follows. At first, I will take a theoretical look on how one can address the concepts relating to forced migration, borders and media representations through a governmental perspective. I will look on the relationship between epistemic governance and media via questions relating to ontological authority. Second, I will introduce the background for my empirical analysis and introduce Finnish context and religious conversion as a phenomenon related to asylum seeking. Third, I will briefly outline frame analysis and its capabilities to scrutinize news reporting. Then I will introduce my findings based on the data. Finally, I will discuss the conclusion that I ended up with and the possible future research that could be done regarding religious conversion, frame analysis and authority.

2 Governing migration

Asylum seekers and other forced migrants are constantly and increasingly under governmental practices. They are assessed, measured and put under surveillance – even before they leave their countries of origins. I will now introduce some elements of the bordering practices that construct the social reality for asylum seekers where they are forced to navigate. I will base my theoretical background on the Foucauldian idea of the relation that power and knowledge have in different practices, which puts the focus on the knowledge-making process. As my empirical part will be based on analysing Finnish newspapers, the concepts of knowledge, authority and epistemic governance will be useful theoretical tools. The role of scientists and policy experts in state politics is influential (Alasuutari & Qadir 2014; 2016), but the construction of expertise is complex and often happens in public sphere, such as different media platforms. Thus, it is also important to address the effects of the mass media in producing public opinion, frames and also authority.

2.1 Bordering practices

“These don’t look like ‘children’ to me”, commented a British MP David Davies on photographs about a group of young migrants who had joined their families in the UK (BBC News 19.10.2016). There has been a public worry in Europe on how to estimate whether an asylum seeker is underage or not if they don’t have an official birth certificate. The UN convention on the Rights of the Child gives an international framework for protecting children and gives more support for underage asylum seekers than adults (European Migration Network 2015). Therefore, dentists, paediatricians, radiographers and social workers use different medical and therapeutical methods to find out whether an asylum seeker is a “true child” (Hjern et al. 2011). The use of wrist radiographs and clavicle computerized tomography and dental X-rays for political purposes has caused critical discussion amongst physicians as their accuracy can have a range of over one year and is more accurate in young children. Assessing chronological age is overall difficult² and a bulletproof diagnostic examination does not exist. (Sauer et al. 2016, 300–301.) Not only the use of ionizing radiation for political reasons, but also the therapeutical methods that social workers use can be problematic when dealing with vulnerable children and their need to build trustful relationships with adults (Hjern et al. 2011, 7).

² The European Academy of Paediatrics has eventually given a recommendation of paediatricians not participating in age determination as a part of asylum-seeking process (Sauer et al. 2016, 302).

Age estimation is one concrete example of how asylum seekers are a group of people who are categorically and constantly under surveillance. They are examined, questioned and measured in order to evaluate their need to access the sphere of international protection. The culture of surveillance and surveillance society (Lyon 2009; Foucault 1977) is highly connected to asylum seekers and comes visible especially in the context of controlling nation states borders. The nation state is being securitized through different means that are usually targeted to non-citizens that represent a somewhat danger. Citizenship offers security only to people who are eligible to it; people excluded from the citizenship are pushed out of the secure regime. (Lyon 2009.) The imagined need for surveillance implicates that there is a security threat that requires attention, and by discussing asylum seekers and refugees as a security issue, various governmental practices become more legitimate.

When addressing bordering practices from a more philosophical and historical perspective, the work of Hannah Arendt is often understandably referred. In her book *Origins of Totalitarianism* (2013/1948), she studies totalitarian movements through Nazism and Stalinism, but also opens up the broader problems that totalitarian systems create with nationalism and “stateless populations”. According to Arendt (2013/1948), stateless people, who are often persecuted minorities, are excluded from the very basic civic and civil rights due to the deep-seated role of nation-state as the actor who can control these fundamental rights. The first recognized refugees are often traced back to the beginning of the 20th century³, and after the First World War there was a political need to categorize, control and establish the status of “nationless” people. League of Nations as the main institution started to draft more systematic protection for the people who were both outside their country of origin and without the protection of “their” state. These nationless, internationally displaced people were given different official documents, such as Nansen passport, to prove their need for international support. The documents offered them certain rights, but the rights were tightly attached to nationality. (Goodwin-Gill & McAdam 2007, 15–20.) Later on, when nation-states made stricter grounds for offering refugee or granting asylum, the role of nationless people remained subaltern compared to state’s sovereignty that was considered more valuable. The basic idea of human rights, that every people has “the right to have rights”, was not targeted to the group of people who were displaced. According to Arendt, in the 20th century, the right to seek asylum got legitimized but also the juridical

³ However, tracing back the history of refugees is under discussion; some historians tend to look the history of refugee further back to the 16th century and argue that displacement due to war has been a part of European history for centuries (Elie 2014, 27). Regardless of the long history of displacement, refugee studies themselves have been interested in refugeehood mostly in the 20th century, and especially after the Geneva Convention 1951 where the formal status for refugees were defined (Skran & Daughtry 2007).

exclusion of certain groups of people got institutionalized in international law. (Arendt 2013/1948.)

The concepts of a nation-state and asylum are thus inextricably linked to borders and bordering. Without national borders there would not be people who would be categorized as asylum seekers, refugees or other forced migrants. Anthropologist Liisa Malkki (1995) has conceptualized national borders and its outsiders through the idea of *national order of things*. She sees that national borders and citizenship are often thought to be the most natural and somehow essential way of organizing human culture. However, transnational migration has changed this “natural” way of things and revealed some deeper structures of human behaviour and movement. Saskia Sassen (1999) regards that there are global “insiders” and “outsiders”, people who have the freedom to move around the globe and people who don’t. The outsiders are out of the national order and they need to be under surveillance to not disturb the order and the sovereignty of nation-states. Again – the binary division between insiders (citizens) and outsiders (non-citizens) somehow justifies the necessity of border-making of a nation-state. Balibar (2004) states that actually the entire world is becoming increasingly divided into opposite life zones and death zones, and there is a “superborder” between these constantly reproduced zones. This superborder offers an arena for the political intervention but often more importantly – non-intervention (ibid., 126–127).

The nation-state plays indeed the most important role when constructing the physical and concrete barriers for migrants’ mobility, and the most crucial nation-state originated status that eventually implements the borders is citizenship. State citizenship offers security for its holder: it reflects the relationship with an individual and a state providing civil, political and social rights to the individual. The state decides whether a human crossing the nation’s border is “illegal” or “legal” and the reasons whether they are allowed to legally stay or not. Anthropologist Nicholas de Genova (2002) sees this status given by a state as a political identity. Both legal and illegal status position a person in a certain social relation to a state, and they both are inextricably connected to citizenship (ibid., 422). In other words, state as an institution produces the foundations for deportation and illegality, citizenship being one of its key practices. However, the concept of citizenship is never stable, and immigration is not a “linear path towards citizenship” as Könönen (2018, 143) portrays it; one has to overcome significant legal, institutional and bureaucratic requirements in order to achieve the wanted citizenship. The idea of an “illegal” citizen is also not only national – it has deep roots in Europe’s border control and the idea of the European ‘security state’. Following the construction of Europe by the 1993 Treaty of Maastricht, “European citizenship” has emerged and new exclusive practices are being produced (Balibar 2004, 120–121). Together with international cooperation, transnational

legislation has occurred controlling human mobility, United Nations being the key player between national governments and giving the framework for international cooperation for governing transnational human mobility.

On the one hand, bordering practices appear in multiple ways and they do not necessarily need to be material but become visible in language. Seemingly subtle bordering practices take place in different discourses circulating in public platforms – media being one of them. News media construct certain representations that create cultural and symbolic borders and boundaries (Holzberg et al. 2018). For example, by constructing news frames about “our” nation-state’s territory and portraying forced migrants as a threat, news media deepens the imagined need for all kinds of border control. (Bruno 2016.) As Holzberg et al. (2018) have noted, especially the discourse of crisis that has been attached to asylum seekers in news media has affected the conception of deservingness which eventually works as a way of bordering. In other words, some people are portrayed of being more entitled to belong to a certain space than others.

On the other hand, bordering practices are indeed *practices* – they include a range of activities that maintain borders of a nation state and appear in various forms and techniques (Yuval-Davis et al. 2018; Parker & Adler-Nissen 2012). Yuval-Davis et al. (2018) call the unexpected, sudden bordering practices as everyday bordering. Everyday bordering is highly intersectional and creates somehow natural-seeming structures of belonging and exclusion (ibid., 230). As Didier Bigo (2014) has also noted, the practices of control do not take place only in material, concrete barriers but also in routines, professional dispositions and habitus. Nor only state institutions “conduct” border control with each other and categorize insiders and outsiders; for example, social services, embassies, employers and companies control the inclusion in the society (Könönen 2018; Parker & Adler-Nissen 2012, 776). Könönen (2018, 144) discusses this as administrative bordering that non-citizens have to encounter. It includes all the processes that are driven by immigration policy and appear in bureaucratic procedures. By constant requirement for national identification by different private and public organizations, asylum seekers face obstacles for getting along in daily life. Bordering practices are unnoticeable for citizens but materialize for non-citizens, quite often also unexpectedly. (ibid.)

Borders are an assemblage that include also highly concrete barriers. Asylum seekers might face various geographical obstacles before they are able to seek for an asylum as asylum can only be

sought physically by being in the destination country⁴. In European context, the Mediterranean is often seen representing the most significant geographical border between Europe and the “others”. Regardless of the 2015 “refugee crisis” discourse, Pugh (2001) discussed “Mediterranean boat people” almost twenty years ago and called for international co-operation for securing the role of seaborne refugees and migrants. He stated that instead of confronting refugees as ‘threats’ for security, they should be addressed as a human welfare issue. (Pugh 2001.) As Balibar (2004, 126) portrays, the values of the European Union such as freedom and human rights have figuratively drowned in the Mediterranean. The Mediterranean has been increasingly under surveillance through cameras, radars, satellites and vessel tracking technologies (Casas-Cortes et al. 2015, 65), and the European Union emphasizes the importance of managing EU’s external borders, especially after 2015⁵. Along with the technological development, bordering practices become more effective while on the other hand, more innovative methods of bypassing these practices are invented.

One angle for conceptualizing the appearance of border practices is following Bigo’s (2014) three-layered approach of the military-strategic field (military/navy), the internal security field (border guards/police) and the global cyber-surveillance social universe (database analysts). The military-strategic field includes the most obvious, concrete and visible practices as the military personnel actively and physically patrol the borders, whereas the border in the internal security field is less solid – the logic of securing internal security via external methods brings the overall *management* to the centre. Asylum seekers are being observed, assessed and most of all managed after they enter the country to assure that internal security does not shake, and the sovereignty is not threatened. Asylum seekers are faced with risk assessment and the suspicious, illegal people are sorted out. (ibid., 213–2016.) In the third social universe, the border is more blurred; computer systems, statistics, algorithms and profiling make a network that is capable of following asylum seeker’s life in order to anticipate what may happen. By gathering traces of asylum seekers movement, the border practices become more subtle, and in the end, “a refinement of biopolitics” as Bigo (2014, 220) describes. This kind of new surveillance technology is again primarily looking for something illegal, something threatening that needs to be traced (Casas-Cortes et al. 2015).

⁴ Dublin Regulation (No 604/2013) includes the criteria and mechanisms for European Union member states on examine applications for international protection if lodged in one of the Member States by a third-country national or a stateless person.

⁵ See for example The European Commission Practical Handbook for implementing and managing the European Border Surveillance System (European Commission 2015).

Coming back to the age estimation and finding out the biological age of an asylum seeker, it is reasonable to address the bordering practices from the perspective of a body. Refugee status determination is the final and legitimized method for assessing asylum seekers “belonging” to proper sphere of international protection, which often includes somehow assessing the body – it is the object where the final assessment of the legitimized belonging happens, which makes an inevitable connection between biotechnology and immigration policy. Biotechnology and immigration policy have long had a connection in Finland. For example, Finland was one of the first countries to establish a law about DNA profiling for family reunification (Tapaninen & Helén 2013). DNA testing is widely used as a verification of family ties in the context of migration in Europe, but the ways of how different countries use the tests in decision-making processes vary. The use of biotechnology is framed by rationales that are related to securing human rights and preventing fraud (ibid. 153–158). Human body is never objective – it is assessed with different “biotechnological lenses” depending on the social status of the person. In the end, it is the place where one can see “the mark of power imprinted” as Fassin and d’Halluin (2005, 597) describe. How power is related to a body depends on what kind of social status the body has: a body can also be a place that displays the evidence of truth. (ibid.) Through all the various governing methods, asylum seeker’s body becomes a stage where the borders play.

All in all, borders take place in different legal processes and identity controls that non-citizens are forced to go through before for example seeking for a job or an apartment – or joining a Christian congregation. Besides the legal practices, bordering happens also in a symbolic and racialized stage in public discussion. Understanding the idea of border and bordering from a wider perspective allows one to observe migration governance that happen in daily, ordinary seeming actions within different institutions and platforms.

2.2 Migration and epistemic governance

Categorizing people inside and outside a nation-state can be approached from the perspective of different exclusive bordering practices but also by taking a closer look to knowledge and power. Who can decide whether an asylum seeker is eligible for an asylum, and where is this knowledge based on? Knowledge around forced migration can be a one way of looking at the broader concept of governing marginalized group of people – asylum seekers and refugees. In this chapter, I will shortly

look at the tradition of governmentality and epistemic governance in order to conceptualize the knowledge that is produced in order to manage asylum seekers.

The wider framework for this study lies on the tradition of social constructionism and its notion on knowledge. Social constructionism includes the idea that all the knowledge of the world is constructed through social processes, not deriving from the objective essence of the world. Thus, via daily interaction that takes place in language, the understanding of the world and knowledge is created. (Burr 2003.) Giving an exact definition for knowledge is overall a challenging epistemological task, but leaning on this theoretical orientation, it can be approached through the portrayal by Berger and Luckmann (1966, 13) of knowledge as a “certainty that phenomena are real and that they possess specific characteristics”. The knowledge indeed is based on the *certainty* or belief of phenomena, not their real essence or nature. The challenge of defining knowledge is due to the relativity of reality and knowledge: for example, what is real in the sphere of religion is maybe not real in scientific context. The relationist nature of the conceptions of the world constructs the deep and intriguing question of what we can actually *know* of the observed reality around us.

Power, as well, has been theorized from numerous perspectives throughout the history of social sciences. The classic theorization on power has traditionally seen power as a social hierarchy that is based on authority. In the simplest definition, authority refers to an ability to exercise one’s will over others (see for example Weber 1978). Another traditional definition deriving more from political sciences is that a state has the sovereignty over a certain geographical area (Kaisto & Pyykkönen 2010, 10). This viewpoint assumes that a nation state is the highest actor that can have power and is behind every application of power. Both of these approaches include the ontological assumption of power as a something that one has or not. In a way, power is seen as some sort of capital that one can use as an exchange to affect people’s actions.

Power does not necessarily need to be theorized as a hierarchy or as a capacity to *use* power in a social community. The Foucauldian tradition lies more on the idea of power as a relation that actualizes in language and discursive practices. Power as such is not seen as a coercive force but more of being based on the social constructivist nature of authority that is built on the idea of knowledge. This knowledge is commonly shared and approved, and it guides people to act upon it. The knowledge, again, is not objective but is based on certain historically constructed rules. This relationship between knowledge and power is the heart of the reproducing nature of power: through practices that are based on knowledge, power has the ability to recreate itself. (Foucault 1991; Foucault 1980.)

Following the footsteps of Michel Foucault, a group of social scientists started to scrutinize further the practices of governing, the “art of government”⁶ as Foucault described it in the late 1970s (Foucault 2008; see Dean 1999, Miller & Rose 1990). Governmentality originally referred to Foucault’s idea of a certain way of how all political order is constructed, and how it makes people conduct themselves. This *conduct of conduct* includes authorities, technologies, techniques and programs (Rose et al. 2006, 101). Due to this pervasive, renewable nature of governmentality it has been used as an approach for various studies and fields. For example, certain studies regarding economy and economic life (Miller & Rose 1990) and risk technologies and insurances (Castel 1991) follow Foucault’s idea of the elements that build modern, governmentalized state. Foucault himself thought that by studying governmentality one could perceive how neoliberalism and neoliberalist subject, “Homo economicus” is constituted (Hamann 2009, 38; Foucault 2008).

The studies on governmentality and its analytical tools also offer a tool to look at forced migration and the concepts of refugeedom (Gartrell 2016) and asylum seeking, especially via exclusive practices: how people are rejected from belonging to a certain space. As noted, definitions and categorizations regarding citizenship are needed in order to control and manage the population. Classifying people into the groups of an asylum seeker, a Christian and a Muslim is one way of governing the people who are allowed to move into a country. The methods that the Finnish Immigration Service use in refugee status determination when trying to find out the real inner conviction, and thus deciding whether an asylum seeker is entitled to international protection, represent one strand of controlling population. By ensuring that the need for an asylum is real, immigration service roots itself in the sphere of governmental state. As Robyn Lui (2002, 3) concludes, refugees and asylum seekers are governed through at least two tactics: “...first, the universal acceptance of the national state form as the unit of political organization; and second, the value of citizenship as exclusive membership of a political community.”

As earlier introduced, the governance of forced migration happens in multiple ways, and one way to scrutinize it further is to look at the epistemic, knowledge-based, layer of the governance. Alasuutari and Qadir (2014; 2016) have introduced the idea of epistemic governance, that Alasuutari has later applied as an approach to scrutinize different authorities (Alasuutari 2018). Epistemic governance

⁶ Michel Foucault introduced the notion of governmentality in the late 1970s in his lectures at Collège de France. At first, he defined governmentality as an apparatus of administrative power, and later on his work he elaborated the concept (for example *Discipline and Punish* 1977; *Power/Knowledge* 1980) and emphasized the concrete techniques and procedures on how individuals but also populations are governed.

roots itself in the tradition of Foucauldian studies on governmentality, but in addition, it includes the level of actors' understanding of the world in the theory. In the end, this understanding of the world is the core of all governance. An epistemic approach to governance focuses on how people's conceptions on reality are affected and hence make them act in a certain way (Alasuutari & Qadir 2014, 71). Alasuutari and Qadir (2014, 71–72) illustrate this by giving an example of a politician who wants to make a reform. In order to convince the audience, the politician needs to reason their statements to a common, shared insight of the world that is most often constructed by experts, authorities or somehow evidence-based knowledge. By doing so, the politician participates in epistemic work. According to Alasuutari and Qadir (2014, 72), epistemic work is always based on three premises on social world: what the world is (ontology of the environment), who we are (actors and identifications) and what is good (norms and ideals). Furthermore, epistemic work operates always on *all* the three objectives.

These premises, the objects of epistemic work, are in the centre when looking at the ways of how one can affect other people's beliefs and thus also make policy changes. They are usually somehow shared, but they can also be debated, discussed and not automatically accepted. However, in order to successfully affect people's conceptions of reality and make effective policy changes, one needs to know the “way people think of things” that is established broadly enough (ibid., 74). Even though Alasuutari and Qadir (2014, 72) use concepts such as *epistemic work* and *strategies*, they also emphasize that the most effective epistemic governance happens in an unconscious level. Actors, such as politicians, do not always work on shared epistemic premises – they just assume that these premises are widely accepted and act accordingly. (ibid.)

Following the Foucauldian notion of power, epistemic governance is neither a capacity nor a feature that one can use over another. Epistemic governance is under constant contest and reproduction through different institutions, such as science and media. When looking at the epistemic work in the context of news reporting of asylum seekers and their religious conversion, the interest turns into the question of authority. Who and by which credits some actors are acknowledged as authorities by news media? What kind of epistemic work is done by the interviewed “experts”?

Given the tradition of governmentality and epistemic governance, Alasuutari (2018) continues to look at authority also from the epistemic approach. Alasuutari (2018) has identified certain strategies on how authorities try to influence other's conduct while advancing their own interests. He combines the Weberian tradition with governmentality and epistemic governance perspectives and focuses on

the aforementioned epistemic work that the authorities do. The core of all authorities is that they try to affect others by calling attention to “persons, organizations or things that they expect others to respect or fear” (ibid., 167). This makes Alasuutari’s conceptualization on authority highly relational; authority works only if people somehow recognize it. This recognition happens again if the understanding of the premises of social world and the situation is somewhat shared (ibid., 167–168); what the world is, who we are and what is good or bad (Alasuutari & Qadir 2014; 2016). In the context of epistemic authorities, Alasuutari (2018, 168) articulates the same premises through “what are the facts, what is possible and what is not, and what is acceptable or desirable”.

Authority and expertise are sometimes overlapping notions. Alasuutari (2018, 171) combines these concepts by addressing authority from the perspective of knowledge, respect and obedience – attributes that are often connected to expertise. In other words, authority includes the influence or persuasion power that makes others do or think according to the authority. Alasuutari has classified these authorities into four types: *capacity-based*, *ontological*, *moral* and *charismatic authority*. Capacity-based authority is based on the assumption that the authority is capable of doing things; for example, use or threat of violence. An example of capacity-based authority in the context of forced migration could be Finnish Immigration Service who has the concrete capability and capacity to offer international protection for asylum seekers. Ontological authority is based on creating a credible picture of reality, where science often plays the most important role. Alasuutari also reminds that for example religious leaders can have special knowledge about the reality that a certain religion shares and where the “truth” itself is not scientific. Moral authority leans on the commonly shared norms, standards and moral principles; for example, a priest citing the Bible is forming their moral authority on the entire tradition of sacred, moral codes. Charismatic authority is based on extraordinary features of an institution or a person, on exceptional heroism or otherwise influential character. These four different authorities can appear individually but are also often intertwined.

Ontological authority, the one based on “expertise or respected accounts of reality” usually includes science and scientific reasoning. This makes it a highly powerful type of authority. Scientific reality represents the credible, widely appreciated knowledge and one could ask whether it is even relevant to question scientific social reality at all. As Alasuutari (2018, 176) emphasizes, ontological authority is one of the most indistinguishable types of authority due to its seemingly objectivity when it comes to political decision-making. Authorities or authoritative sources seem to be the most neutral way of explaining society and thus arguing the best political solution. Alasuutari also emphasizes the colourfulness of ontological authorities; by referring to Weber’s notion on oracles and priests (1978;

430), Alasuutari reminds that religious leaders are as well thought to have some knowledge of the social reality that no one else have in the religious community. This gives religious leaders and communities the role of ontological authority. Only they have the access to the ontological, essential and final truth in the certain, religious reality. (Alasuutari 2018.)

Ontological authority, as all forms of authorities, can appear for example in actors, texts and principles. They can be basically anything that actors use in order to affect each other's views and beliefs. Alasuutari also suggests that it is possible to "pile up" these epistemic authorities, and thus use them as a more influential epistemic capital. (Alasuutari 2018, 181–183.) This epistemic capital is especially present when institutions try to influence policy making. As different authorities can also be institutionalized, Alasuutari et al. (2016, 63–65) suggest that the more actors want to affect policy making, the more epistemic capital they should accumulate. In order to do so, formal, institutionalized organizations should somehow link their organization with already existing authorities and international networks (ibid., 68).

2.3 Media and authority

Along with the increased interest in migration research in past decades, more knowledge has been produced within the sphere of migration that has started to circulate also in media. Casas-Cortes et al. (2015, 63) call this as the "migration knowledge hype", the varieties of different knowledges that are being produced under the umbrella of migration. New epistemic communities, such as academic and policy institutions, NGOs and border control organizations, have been established, and different types of knowledge is constantly produced and categorized as migration knowledge, media offering the platform for public discussion around it and constructing an image of authoritative sources. Policy reports, academic contributions, workshops and institutional surveys have rooted themselves in policy practices and guide decision making (ibid., 14) and eventually flow to public discussion around migration.

When a news reporter interviews an "expert", a "professional" or similar somehow authoritative source, it gives space for a person or a group of people to make an *account* of what is happening. Accountability can refer to different kinds of descriptions and explanations that are given for a behaviour that one uses to modify their own actions. Thus, this accountability makes everyday methods and practical reasoning visible. (Jokinen et al. 2012, 21.) Media tries to "make sense" of

asylum seekers and their religious conversions as well – it tries to give an explanation, a practical reason, for the phenomenon. For doing this reasoning, journalists use the help of experts, commonly approved group of people who have gathered knowledge of a certain issue.

Media in general is a many-layered concept and can be viewed from different perspectives depending on the objective. In this study, media refers to a plural form of ‘mass media’. I understand mass media according to Merriam-Webster as a “medium of communication (such as newspapers, radio or television) that is designed to reach the mass of the people” (Merriam-Webster 2020). Media as a deliverer of selected information for the “crowd”, has a connection to journalism which often refers to a mass communication that focuses on current issues and is based on facts. Both ‘current issues’ and ‘facts’ are contestable terms though. What is current depends who one asks: the more current the news is, the more valuable it often is, but the topicality is always a decision. The basic idea of journalism is that there is a phenomenon big enough happening that is important to transfer into information and deliver to a mass. However, the factuality of the ‘phenomenon’ is always a choice, and often framed through already existing media text genres. (Kunelius 2003, 21–22.) Journalism, as any form of human communication, is based on making interpretations of situations. By understanding this constructionist nature of fact-making it is even more important to take a look on what and who the mass media and journalism are putting on pedestal.

More than just a single channel, media can be seen as an arena where multiple groups of people try to get their voices heard and affect public opinion based on their presuppositions of the world and current issues. There is a constant competition on who eventually gets to be interviewed and who is the final, most prominent expert or authority. In the end, experts are a key feature for news reporting; they make the phenomenon credible and clarify the overall issue with their knowledge that is based on their authority. Finding trustful sources is an essential part of journalistic work, and journalists have often their own, personal connections that they use when needing a professional for an output (Järvi 2011, 58). Media also tends to recognize some kind of expertise easier and offers space for certain experts to affect the views of policy makers. This makes mass media an important platform also when looking at questions regarding epistemic work; who are the people that can give authoritative accounts of reality. (Alasuutari & Qadir 2014, 74.)

The performative nature of authority is present when looking at the portrayal of expertise in media. The ways how experts are discussed and portrayed also has an effect on how they and their messages are perceived. Media creates a public arena for policy makers to influence others and in order to do

so, they also need to perform in a certain way especially when dealing with a crisis (Hajer & Uitermark 2008). As Hajer and Uitermark (2008) explain, performing a “situation” in a particular way basing on both rational calculation but also emotion, policy makers represent their definition of reality (ibid. 7) through media. Experts, authorities and policy makers, that often intertwine, frame themselves and their perception of the situation differently, but also their portrayal in media varies.

In a way, media has control over common understanding what is socially shared knowledge (van Dijk 1995) and producing knowledge can be seen as one of its core functions (Motion & Weaver 2005, 246). Media should, however, not be regarded only as a messenger of current affairs or an objective source of information. Journalists and reporters can be viewed as actors, who have their own personal interests, and whose work, knowledge-production, is guided through journalistic practices. They can be seen as interpreters; at the same time journalists are “gatekeepers” of the public sphere but they also select the frames to look at. News are written based on the journalistic conventions; through them the information seems familiar and trustful. Journalists are not an autonomous group but are inextricably interconnected to other societal roles, which inevitably shape the journalistic profession (Pöyhtäri & Ojala 2018, 177) and affect their overall understanding of the world.

3 Background

Coming back from the theoretical questions relating to governance of forced migration, I will now introduce the background for my empirical study. I want to shortly address how migration has been and can be conceptualized, how Finland has reacted to new migratory movements and what is the role of Finnish Christian churches in it. I will take a look at the phenomenon of religious conversions the news articles are about and shortly look into the public and judicial response to the conversions. Before introducing the methods and the data set, I will assess how asylum seekers in general have been portrayed in news media.

3.1 Defining migration

Due to the increased number of forced migrants in recent years in Europe, different definitions and categorizations have been under discussion. In public discussion, the categorization between refugees and asylum seekers is most commonly used. The legal definition for an asylum seeker is based on the 14th Article of Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) by the General Assembly of the

United Nations in 1948. The declaration states that “everyone has the right to seek and enjoy asylum from persecution”. It is thus a universal and inalienable human right. The declaration was first of its kind and it became a common standard for all nations. It also gave a foundation for the Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees, published three years later in 1951 by UNCHR, where more specific qualifications for refugees were defined and the current codification for asylum seekers and refugees was given. The key principle ended up being non-refoulement (Article 33) which refers to the idea that a refugee should not be returned to a country where they may face serious threats to life or freedom. The non-refoulement principle is still widely practiced.

An asylum seeker has indeed a right to seek an asylum from persecution. The UN Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees limits asylum for those who have “a well-founded fear of persecution for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group, or political opinion”. The definition for persecution by the UN Convention is seemingly simple but its final application lies in the national policy and laws of the recipient country which gives individual states more power to determine asylum seekers’ need of protection (Price 2006). The persecution criterion, as Matthew Price calls them, have also been under constant academic critique; the criterion does not include all the humanitarian needs for asylum and the overall definition is too connected to post-war European context (*ibid.*, 419–423).

Looking at the legal definition of asylum seekers and refugees offers one concrete way for categorizing displaced people. However, it offers quite little analytical tools for a social scientific study. One way of addressing the concepts regarding displacement is by broadening the scope to a wider institutional portrayal. For example, the concept of refugeedom (Gatrell 2016) allows to look deeper into the regime of refugee and other displaced migrants. Refugeedom includes all “the administrative practices, legal norms, social relations and refugees’ experiences” (*ibid.*, 170) that are culturally produced. Relating to this broader, institutional way of conceptualizing refugees, it is important to recall that there are more actors affecting global refugee and asylum seeker flows than just nation states and the displaced people themselves. International organizations, unions, security bureaucracies, political parties, civil servants, universities and academics, non-governmental organizations, smugglers, think tanks, migrant associations but also nonbinding consultative processes amongst nation states are actors that participate in constructing the asylum reality (Arcazaro & Wiesbrock 2015, 4). The legal definition offers one, nation state-based definition for a certain type of displacement, but refugeedom and asylum seeking suggest that there are more – the entire culturally produced image of a forced migrant.

The challenge of giving specific definitions for forced migrants lies also in the complex and intertwined patterns of today's human mobility. Migratory movements tend to be so mixed that making exact categories, such as "economic migrant" or "environmental refugee" (Berchin et al. 2017) does not necessary cover all the diverse reasons for transnational migration. Countries where "asylum-space is virtually non-existent" as UNHCR representative Johannes van der Klaauw (2010, 60) portrays it, it is even harder to make a distinction between migrant statuses as migrants might establish themselves incorrectly in terms of juridical consequences. For example, in a country where it is hard to get granted an asylum, a migrant might establish themselves as a migrant worker regardless of their real needs. (ibid.) This is one reason why some scholars have started to use an umbrella category of *mixed migration* that, slightly depending on the definition, include all the migrants who are protected by the International Refugee Law (Linde 2011). Mixed migration gives justice for the complexity of migration but as a conceptual tool it might be too wide, especially when analysing specific phenomenon relating to different strands of forced migration. Voluntary and forced migration as forms of migration are not contrary but more of intertwined and complementary (Kyriakides 2017, 934).

However, voluntary migration and displacement are not politically neutral terms either and might implicate the common attitude about "deserving"⁷ and "non-deserving" immigrant (Goodman et al. 2017, 106; Pantti 2016; Sassen 1999). Forced migrants, including asylum seekers, are required to justify their stay in the receiving country more than people who hold a permanent justification for it, a citizenship. The common public worry about asylum seekers is them "getting more than they deserve" (Goodman & Speer 2007, 166). They need credible evidence for proving the need for international protection, and the evidence is as well under constant suspicion. Thus, the dichotomy between a "negative economic migrant" and "positive refugee" pushes asylum seekers to present themselves as victims who are not unbalancing the security of European countries (Kyriakides 2017, 934; Zimmerman 2011, 335). Questions related to categorization based on deservingness go along with the overall moral nature of refugeehood, as Goodman et al. (2017) well depict:

By distinguishing deserving from undeserving or genuine from bogus asylum seekers, people present themselves as caring about some (genuine) refugees' wellbeing and also

⁷ In this thesis, I portray asylum seekers as forced migrants. However, it is not my intention to focus on who "deserves" to receive international protection in Finland but more of underlining the group of people who are displaced from their countries of origin.

arguing against refugee rights in general. In this way, stating that most refugees are bogus casts doubt on the legitimacy of all asylum seekers. (Goodman et al. 2017, 106.)

In migration studies, making a conceptual distinction between voluntary and forced migration is common and has often well-founded reasons. David Turton (2003) has conceptualized the binary division through three main reasons. First, forced migrants have different experience and needs from voluntary migrants, even though “refugee experience” as such does not exist – the reasons behind forced migration are numerous and new refugee identities and meanings are negotiated in the process of displacement. Second, forced migration can be seen as a result of globalization but also a result of an increased North-South divide in terms of living conditions and human rights. Thus, concepts relating to “migration industry” might occur useful, such as human trafficking and smuggling (Castles 2003, 16). Third, forced migrants make us reconsider some basic concepts relating to a belonging to a society: who do we call members of the society, how to define a citizen, what differs them from us and why. Basically, forced migrants force us to reflect who we are and what kind of attitude we have towards “strangers” (Turton 2003, 7). Especially the last reason has been a motivator for conducting this study – it is our responsibility to find out what kind of exclusive boundaries Finland has as a society.

3.2 Finland, migration and religion

Finland has traditionally been a country of emigration. During over hundred years independency, Finland has faced various emigration trends, starting from the mass migration to the United States in the beginning of the 20th century, following the emigration to Sweden between the 1950s and 1970s, ending to the “brain drain” of the 21st century (Johansson 2008). Most of the reasons why Finnish people have emigrated are related to looking for better job opportunities and living conditions. Work-related migration has been a significant part of European economy for centuries (Sassen 1999) and Finnish people have consequently followed the trend. Recently, following global and European human mobility trends, Finland has also changed to a country of immigration. Besides the increase of work-oriented immigration, Finland has become a country where people seek for an asylum and refugee mostly due to the political conflicts and wars in Middle East in the 2010th. (Finnish Immigration Service 2020b).

Finland has also traditionally been a nation-state with a strong Christian culture. However, according to Pew Research Center (2018), Western Europe has become one of the most secular regions in the

world. Christianity does not play the same role as it used to in European people's everyday life and even though most of the people still categorize themselves as Christians, they do not actually seemingly practice Christianity by for example participating in church services⁸. Nonetheless, this is only a trend of church service attendance, not necessary a trend of decreasing Christian belief itself. The tendency has been similar in Finland – only 9% of Finnish people categorize themselves as church-attending Christians whereas 68% percent conceive themselves as non-practicing Christians. The portion of religiously unaffiliated is 22% and the people belonging to other religions is 1%. (Pew Research Center 2018, 6–7.) Until the end of 20st century, almost all of the Finnish people belonged to the Evangelical Lutheran Church or the Orthodox Church (Heino 1997, 16). At the end of 2018, only 3,8 million people of altogether 5,5 million nation were official members of the Evangelical Lutheran Church. There has been a significant change in terms of official church statistics but also in people's perceptions about their religious identity. Regardless of the global increase of some forms of Christianity, mostly the Pentecostal-charismatic movement (Robbins 2004), the Western European trend of secularisation has rooted itself in Finland too.

Immigrants have been part of Finland's religious map during the entire history of Finland, which has led to a more pluralistic religious field in Finland especially in the late 20th century. Immigrants have long played a significant role in different religious communities, and particularly Christian churches have tried to find new ways to meet immigrants and integrate them into their activities. Many congregations offer activities in foreign languages, such as Sunday services and language-based small groups. (Martikainen 2013, 70–71.) Christian churches also have the largest number of new immigrant members amongst old religious organizations. However, international migration does not only diversify the existing religious communities. Immigrants have also established entirely new religious congregations in Finland, such as Muslim mosque organizations and Buddhist and Mandaean communities in Finland. (Martikainen 2009, 178).

Christian churches have played a special role in the resettlement of asylum seekers and refugees starting from the Second World War. Leaning to the Christian ethics, such as loving one's neighbour and protecting the ones in need, churches have offered sanctuary⁹ for asylum seekers and thus also

⁸ However, "practicing Christianity" (through for example participating church services) does not automatically mean "being Christian" or vice versa. The criteria for assessing inner conviction is always debatable and joining Sunday services is only one visible, institutional and organization-based way of practicing Christianity.

⁹ The idea of sanctuary is however hundreds of years old, and it has had significance for all major world religions. Before the 17th century, the institution that offered sanctuary for protecting certain displaced people was seen as a "guardian" of the society and important actor in maintaining social cohesion. (Marfleet 2007, 138–139.)

entered the political debate about who is eligible for international protection and who not. In Finland, the Evangelical Lutheran Church has offered sanctuary for 40 years, but the practice has become publicly acknowledged action after 2007 when the case of Naze Aghai¹⁰ was widely mediatized (Pyykkönen 2009; Horsti 2013). The year 2007 can also be seen as a turning point for the Evangelical Lutheran Church public participation in the debates concerning asylum-seeking policies overall. Finnish Ecumenical Council (FEC) published an instruction document “Church as Sanctuary” (2007) and started to take more public stance against deportations. (Horsti 2013, 80–81.)

The role of religion in the context of asylum seeking in Finland is various. In his study about sanctuary practices in Finland, Miikka Pyykkönen (2009) categorized the parties that are included in the sanctuary politics into four: immigrants, the Finnish state, the Finnish Ecumenical Council and Evangelical Lutheran parishes and civic organizations. This distinction could be generalized to many religion-related phenomena regarding seeking asylum. Religion can be approached as an inner conviction and thus as a claim for asylum application due to the possible persecution (immigrant) and also as a claim of granting asylum (the state). Religion obviously plays a role in the work of Christian churches, and also certain (non-religious) NGOs participate in supporting sanctuary practices in order to support asylum seekers who are under a threat of deportation.

Finland has almost always had freedom of religion regardless of the dominant role of the Evangelical Lutheran Church. Religious persecution as such does not occur in Finland, which enables asylum seekers to use religious persecution as an asylum claim. The Finnish Immigration Service does not gather data based on asylum seekers religious background but majority of the countries of origins in the past few years have been Muslim countries such as Iraq, Afghanistan and Iran (Finnish Immigration Service 2015). Open Doors, a non-governmental organization which focuses on following global trends on Christian persecution, has classified the risk of persecution against Christians in Afghanistan and Iran as “extreme persecution” whereas there is a risk for “very high oppression” in Iraq (Open Doors 2020). Religious persecution can be particularly hard towards the converts from Islam to Christianity due to the fundamental interpretation on Quran. (ibid.) Also, international political tensions can affect persecution as world religions sometimes tend to represent

¹⁰ Naze Aghai was a Kurdish woman from Iran who fled political persecution in 2005 and sought asylum in Finland. At first, her asylum application got rejected and her deportation decision caught significant media attention, demonstrations and petitions. As she was the first person to have granted sanctuary after the instructions published by Finnish Ecumenical Council, her case can be seen as a starting point for the discussion that the Evangelical Lutheran Church and state have about international protection. (Pyykkönen 2009, 23–24.)

broader institutions than just belief systems. For example, in Iraq, the common attitude against Christians, or “non-believers” in general, is highly exclusionist as they are not practicing the Islamic way of living. In the 21st century, Iraqi Christians have been seen as representing the US and their “crusade against Islam” and Christian communities have faced many violent and fatal attacks (Petit et al. 2007, 181).

In the spring and summer of 2015, Finland, amongst other Nordic countries, suddenly became a country where tens of thousands of people sought an asylum. The peak in asylum applications was reached in the fall 2015, when 32 476 people were registered as asylum seekers. Most of the people arrived through Sweden, but some also took the route across Russia and some other ways. The route was long indeed as most of the asylum seekers came from Middle East or Northern Africa. (Finnish Immigration Service 2015.) Asylum seekers were relocated to different parts of Finland and the unexpectedly big increase in the number of asylum seekers caused various reactions; communes and cities organized reception centres with the help of NGOs, different volunteering platforms were established. In addition, religious communities, mostly Christian churches, participated in the shared project of helping asylum seekers.

When asylum seekers started to arrive Finland in 2015, many churches along with the Evangelical Lutheran Church wanted to approach them with different methods. Some of the churches had previous experience in helping immigrants or other international experience through missionary work. Notwithstanding, every third Evangelical Lutheran congregation started their charity work with immigrants only in 2015 and the situation was new in many ways, especially in the more rural parts of Finland. The initiative to help came originally from church administration but also from bishops, vicars, individual employees and church members. In some cases, public pressure also motivated churches to react. (Niemi & Siirto 2017, 13–14.) Hanna Niemi and Ulla Siirto (2017, 15) who studied the role and forms of assistance of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in the refugee crisis noticed that congregations had diverse ways of organizing the assistance, and not all the congregations were as active as others. In some cases, the active church members who wanted to volunteer, were guided to NGOs, such as Finnish Red Cross.

Evangelical Lutheran congregations wanted to offer physical shelter but also mental, religious support. At first, physical help included mainly picking up from railway or bus stations, offering food and clothes and making sure that the acute, concrete needs were fulfilled. Later on, congregations started to invite asylum seekers to masses and other religious events and arrange more organized

leisure activities, such as coffee and handicraft clubs and camping trips. Some active church members started to organize Finnish language classes and assisted with the bureaucratic problems that asylum seekers faced when trying to understand the Finnish asylum system. (Hartikainen 2019, 44; Niemi & Siirto 2017, 15–20).

However, not only the Evangelical Lutheran Church offered their help amongst religious communities. Evangelical Lutheran Church and other Christian communities collaborated relating to for example temporary reception centres and emergency accommodation. They also organized some smaller-scale activities together, such as ecumenical camps and cultural clubs. The cooperation was mostly seen as positive and connective, but some disagreements were also met due to the different biblical interpretations. The cooperation happened mostly together with the Evangelical Lutheran Church, the Pentecostal Church of Finland and the Evangelical Free Church of Finland. Some other religious communities, such as Islam mosques, also participated for example by offering free meals for asylum seekers. (Niemi & Siirto 2017, 41–42.)

There has not been a comprehensive study of how smaller Christian congregations, that do not belong under the Evangelical Lutheran Church, took part, even though they have been active in terms of assisting but also evangelization. In Finland, where the Evangelical Lutheran Church is the most important actor in organizing Christian communities through its connection to the state, other Christian movements acted mostly in a similar way as the Evangelical Lutheran Church. (Niemi & Siirto 2017, 36, 64.) Charismatic free movements, such as the Pentecostal Church of Finland and the Evangelical Free Church of Finland organized similar social activities, such as Finnish language teaching and coffee clubs.

The activity of Charismatic movements can be seen for example from the precedents regarding conversion to Christianity as an asylum claim. The first Supreme Administrative Court case about a converted asylum seeker (KHO:2017:63) took place in the context of a Pentecostal church. The asylum seeker had joined a Pentecostal church and got baptized, which was seen problematic in terms of credibility assessment due to the different baptism practices. The Pentecostal church was also depicted as less organized and serious organization when judges assessed its credibility as a Christian institution.

All in all, the (Pentecostal) baptism teaching varies from the Lutheran one. Thus, the baptism certificate does not necessarily show the authenticity of an inner conviction in a similar way as a Lutheran baptism teaching. (KHO:2017:63)

Different Christian churches started to face different administrative challenges when welcoming asylum seekers to the congregations. Pentecostal church was not seen as credible in terms of Christian teaching whereas Evangelical Lutheran Church was blamed for giving baptism certificates too easily (Satakunnan Kansa 27.8.2019). Evangelical Lutheran Church and other Christian churches also came up with a whole new situation in terms of political attendance and public roles. Some church members started to take more space in public discussion about the role of religion in the asylum process. For example, in Kemijärvi, a commune of 7000 habitants in Northern Finland, a case of a converted Iranian asylum seeker caught national media attention (Iltalehti 18.8.2019). A young man, who was called Sardar in newspapers¹¹, converted to Christianity in Finland and became an active member of the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Kemijärvi. According to the vicar of the Kemijärvi congregation, he was a well-known and liked member of the congregation, and the negative asylum decision was a shock to the community. Before his deportation to Iran, church members collected an address of over 1000 signatures to prove their support for Sardar. They wanted to make a public statement to support Sardar and affect Finnish Immigration Service's asylum decision¹².

Cases like Sardar's opened up a new discussion about Christianity as a claim for asylum. As some asylum seekers started to join different congregations, church representatives and members wanted to show their support for the new Christians in public. (Hartikainen 2019, 45; Yle Uutiset 6.9.2017) Especially after the 2016's tightening of asylum policies (Saarikkomäki et al. 2018), Evangelical Lutheran Church took a strong public stance on how Finnish Immigration Service should deal with the asylum applications regarding religious claims. Over four hundred priests, mostly from the Evangelical Lutheran Church, signed a petition that was handed out for Paula Risikko, the Ministry of Interior at that time (20.9.2017). The petition was about the importance of listening to the church employees when assessing the credibility of a religious conversion as an asylum claim. Kaisa Huhtala, vicar of the Church of Teljä in Pori, was in charge of the petition and took a strong public position to support the new converts (Yle Uutiset 29.1.2018). Similar petitions to the government were conducted in different Charismatic churches (for example Finnish Speaking Pentecostal Church in

¹¹ Many asylum seekers have used fake names when giving interviews in order to protect their privacy and security.

¹² Sardar was eventually deported to Iran due to the negative asylum decision. According to Kirkko ja kaupunki (6.3.2020), the newspaper of the Evangelical Lutheran church in the Helsinki area, Sardar got caught from the airport by Iranian authorities and the current location of Sardar is unknown.

Finland (Suomen Helluntaikirkko 5.6.2018) and the Evangelical Free Church of Finland (Suomen Vapaakirkko 21.3.2017).

Eventually in the end of 2019, the Finnish Ecumenical Council published a petition about the need of respecting the freedom of religion of asylum seekers and the importance of following international legislation concerning deportations (Finnish Ecumenical Council 2019). Finnish Ecumenical Council has representatives from all major Finnish Christian churches besides Evangelical Lutheran Church, including Finnish Orthodox Church, Catholic Church in Finland, Salvation Army in Finland, Anglican Church in Finland and United Methodist Church in Finland (Finnish Ecumenical Council 2020) and the petition was signed by the leaders of the member churches. The council can be seen as a significant community and channel for Christian churches to take collective public action.

Later on, Päivi Räsänen, a MP from Christian Democratic Party (Suomen Kristillisdemokraatit), conducted a written question (KK 77/2019 vp) for the Speaker of the Parliament. The written question was about the credibility assessment of religious conversion, and Räsänen wanted to know by which methods does the government follow and assess the implementation of human rights in the credibility assessment procedure of religious conversion. Räsänen referred to the Article 18 Article Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948) where freedom of religion and freedom of changing religion are defined. She also asked in which ways it is being assured that asylum seekers who are eligible for an asylum are getting granted one. Also, other political parties and individual politicians supported church professionals with their requirements of approving their expertise in assessing religious conversion. For example, The Centre Party of Finland¹³ (Suomen Keskusta) and individual politicians from The Green League (Vihreä liitto) in Finland¹⁴ took a stance on the asylum procedure on behalf of increasing the expert role of church officials in asylum procedures regarding religious conversion. Protecting asylum seekers' legal rights and assuring a fair asylum procedure seemed to unite politicians from different parties and values.

¹³ For example, Suomenmaa, which is the main magazine for the Centre Party, published an editorial (23.8.2019) with the title "An official cannot assess the credibility of a Christian belief". The editorial stated that officials dealing with asylum decisions and assessing the credibility of asylum seekers' religious conversion should consult church representatives. The editorial also refers to the aforementioned appeal that the group of priests published and agreed to its message.

¹⁴ Also, other individual politicians participated in the discussion within for example their private social media channels. For example, Ville Niinistö (MP, The Green League) tweeted as follows (translation self-made): "This time I agree with Päivi Räsänen. I have met several asylum seekers who have converted to Christianity that are serious about their belief and worried about their lives. It is a mockery (irvikuva) that this belief is measured by officials who should at least trust the congregation." (3.8.2018).

The public petitions by Christian churches were targeted to make policy changes in Finnish asylum procedures by giving more value on the expertise that church employees have. The Christians formed seemingly one community, also including NGOs and politicians, that stood against Finnish Immigration Service's policies. Finnish Immigration Service (22.8.2019) replied to the requirements through a Q&A customer bulletin where questions such as "When does a Christian get granted an asylum?", "Why religious conversion is asked about?" and "How is religious conviction assessed?" were answered. Finnish Immigration Service emphasized that all asylum applications are treated individually, and no religious conviction means an automatic positive asylum decision. All in all, the dialogue between Finnish Immigration Service and various people who supported converted asylum seekers has been going on since 2015 with different phases. The core questions have been rotating around the credibility assessment and who has the best knowledge to do it; whether it is immigration officials or church representatives, and if church representatives, which Christian movement should be followed.

3.3 Religious conversion and credibility assessment

Evangelical Lutheran Church played a notable role in assisting asylum seekers in Finland. As mentioned, they offered physical help, but also mental support based on Christianity. As Niemi and Siirto (2017) noticed in their study about church employees in 2016, many church members were surprised about the attention that Christianity and Christian churches caught amongst asylum seekers. Along with the increased interest in Christian communities, some asylum seekers started to convert to Christianity. It caused different reactions; on the one hand, church members were obviously pleased about the new members (Yle Uutiset 8.3.2017) but on the other hand, some of the priests were also suspicious about the motives behind the conversions (Yle Uutiset 7.9.2017).

Religious conversion in the context of this study refers to the conversion from Islam to Christianity, which represents only one strand of various different religious conversion processes and possibilities. Christian converts might face serious societal consequences, legal barriers and even life threats in countries where religions play a different role. The overall restrictions on religion have steadily rose during the 21st century (Pew Research Center 2019), and in Islamic countries, where Sharia law is applied, apostasy and blasphemy are considered illegal. The consequences that a convert might face can be severe and even fatal (Open Doors 2020). This trajectory makes religious conversion of

Muslim asylum seekers a highly political issue by putting the religious conversion to the centre of international protection and non-refoulement.

There is no exact data about the number of asylum seekers who have publicly converted to Christianity in Finland as Finnish Immigration Service does not collect statistics on grounds of seeking asylum. Nevertheless, Finnish Immigration Service states that the number of applicants who fear persecution in their country of origins due to conversion to Christianity in Finland, has been significantly increasing especially around 2017, and the estimated number of converts is around one thousand. (Finnish Immigration Service 12.6.2017/22.8.2019.) The biggest reason for the increased number of positive asylum decisions overall in 2017 was the religious conversion (Finnish Immigration Service 30.1.2018), which also gives an idea about the extent of the phenomenon.

The ways on how one can join a Christian church depend on the Christian movement and its traditions. For example, the Church Order (Kirkkojärjestys 8.11.1991/1055 v. 1993) that belongs under the Church Law (Kirkkolaki 26.11.1993/1054) has defined how one can judicially join Finland's Evangelical Lutheran Church. There are basically three methods: a child baptism, a former member of the Evangelical Lutheran Church who has previously attended confirmation school and declares their faith of the Church, or any other person of a certain age who is not a member of the Evangelical Lutheran Church and participates to the necessary teaching, gets baptized (unless they has already been properly baptized) and confesses the faith of the Church. Thus, baptism and confirmation are the key elements for an official membership of the Evangelical Lutheran Church. Charismatic churches, nonetheless, are not legally bid to any specific practices for registering new members. Their ways of joining congregation are still often similar. For example, Pentecostal church requires a personal statement of a belief and baptism in order to register a new member (Suomen Helluntaikirkko 2020). Regardless of the different Christian doctrines, baptism and personal confession are seen as the most important rituals that allow one to become a full member of a Christian church.

Similarly, leaving Islam is not a straightforward or linear transition either. As Roald (2004, 12) notes, the ways of being Muslim are various. Some address the concept of Muslim with a ritual-oriented focus; in order to *be* a Muslim, one has to follow certain Islamic traditions, such as praying, fasting and dietary rules and moral and sexual codes. Other people with Muslim backgrounds emphasizes more the personal, belief-focused notion on Islam that is based on expressing the two witnesses of

faith¹⁵. (ibid.) Islam, being one of the biggest religions in the world, is an umbrella that includes various Muslim traditions and ways of practicing. Regardless of the variety of Muslimness and leaving Islam, apostasy and apostates¹⁶ as a marginal phenomenon have caught little sociological attention, when it comes to former Muslims and their experiences (Cottee 2015; Van Nieuwkerk 2018, 2–3), whereas moving in Islam has traditionally caught more attention (see Roald 2004).

Asylum seekers converting to Christianity in Finland is a relatively new phenomenon and there has not been a notable amount of research conducted in Finland before. The main studies about the theme are Master's theses from different fields of social sciences. For example, in her Master's thesis, Vaula Meisalmi (2017) studied the credibility assessment of religious conversion in Finland by analyzing 25 asylum decisions and the methods of how the Finnish Immigration Service evaluates the conversion. She found out that the Finnish Immigration Service focuses mainly on the asylum seeker's ability to be coherent in his/her story of conversion. Sami Reinikka (2019) had similar findings – in his Master's thesis he focused on religion as a claim for asylum and how the credibility of the conversion is assessed in Finland. He analysed seven precedents by the Supreme Administrative Court and two by the Administrative Court where asylum seekers had converted to Christianity *sur place*¹⁷. He used the precedents to find out which is the most important element that an authority (Finnish Immigration Service) uses to make the decision whether the conversion is plausible or not and noticed that the authorities trust more on the inner manifestation than the outer one (such as belonging or going to a church or baptism). Thus, the hearing plays the most important role when authorities assess the credibility. Iiris Nikanne studied in her Master's thesis (2018) the personal experiences of asylum migrants who have converted from Islam to Christianity. The experiences about conversion processes varied but there were also some common aspects, such as associating freedom and peace in Europe to Christianity and Islam to societal problems in their countries of origin. All of the converts stated that they had found peace and became more forgiving and loving after deciding to convert to Christianity. However, their families' and other Muslims' reactions were rather negative, and they hoped people would support them and understand that they

¹⁵ "I witness that there is no deity, but God, and I witness that Muhammad is the Prophet of God." (The *Shadada*, one of the most important Islamic creeds)

¹⁶ The academic literature focusing on religious conversion often discusses converts as *apostates*, focusing on the disaffiliation process of a religious movement. There is a conceptual difference between apostates and converts, and in this study, the focus is on the conversion process from Islam to Christianity, not on apostasy as in leaving a religion.

¹⁷ *Sur place* refers to a situation where an asylum seeker presents claims for their asylum application that have occurred after leaving their country of origin. (UNHCR Handbook 1992.)

have become ‘real Christians’. The interviews by the converts were in line with the interviews by the pastors who worked with the converts.

As religious conversion amongst asylum seekers was a new phenomenon for the Finnish Immigration Service, basic judicial principles regarding the new claims were needed to outline. Religious conversions brought new challenges for refugee status determination (RSD) practices conducted by Finnish Immigration Service. RSD plays the key role in asylum decisions and it is a special feature of asylum procedure due to its highly interpretative nature¹⁸. In the first place, RSD takes place in the Finnish Immigration Service, a bureau under Ministry of the Interior. If the decision is appealed, the case can be handled in Helsinki District Administrative Court, and finally the Supreme Administrative Court. After 2015¹⁹, there are altogether five different precedent cases made by the the Supreme Administrative Court concerning religious conversion to Christianity as a claim for asylum. The common feature for all of the cases was that the asylum seeker was a young Muslim man who justified their asylum claims due to the fear of religious persecution in their countries of origins because of a religious conversion which had happened sur place, in Finland. One of the first precedents (KHO:2017:63), given in 21st of April in 2017, was about an Iranian asylum seeker who had converted to Christianity in Finland and sought asylum due to the possible persecution in Iran, where leaving Islam (considered as apostasy) is against the state law. Finnish Immigration Service did not consider his need for international protection sufficient because according to them, the asylum seeker had not intentionally increased his knowledge about Christianity after coming to Finland. Finnish Immigration Service also stated that the asylum seeker described his Christian identity in such a superficial and general way so that the Christian conviction could not be seen truthful. The asylum seeker made an appeal to the Administrative Court and his asylum status was changed into a positive one. After the positive asylum decision, Finnish Immigration Service made another appeal to the Supreme Administrative Court which eventually sent the application back to Administrative Court to get a more specific oral hearing on the case. Thus, the Supreme Administrative Court did not change the positive asylum decision but instead wanted to add more evidence in the form of a hearing to support the decision of the Administrative Court.

¹⁸ As Ida Staffans (2012), who has studied evidence in European asylum procedures notes, “RSD is by nature a procedure of special demands and solutions, which does not neatly fit into traditional categories of judicial decision-making” (ibid., 19).

¹⁹ Muslim asylum seekers have converted to Christianity in Finland also before 2015, see precedents KHO:2009:87 and KHO:2011:114 for conversion from Islam to Jehovah’s Witness.

Currently the last precedent (KHO:2019:18), in 2019, was about an Afghan asylum seeker who had converted to Christianity in Finland, and the information of his conversion had spread to Afghanistan which caused a fear of his persecution due to his new religious identity. The Administrative Court had stated that the asylum seeker didn't seem to have particularly deep or personal experience on Christianity. However, Supreme Administrative Court was needed to assess the risk of possible persecution that could happen if the asylum seeker had enough religion-related features that could lead to persecution. Thus, the core question was about the formal features that are attached to the idea of being a Christian and whether these features could cause persecution. Supreme Administrative Court noted that according to the country information by Finnish Immigration Service, there remains a risk that certain outer Christian features, for example baptism and participating Christian activities, could lead to severe persecution in Afghanistan. This precedent shows the complexity of credibility assessment regarding religious conversion – even though the asylum officers didn't consider the conversion as *real*, the consequences of a public, “external” conversion could be serious and require international protection.

Determining whether an asylum seeker is eligible for a refugee status and thus international protection is based on claims they present. An applicant's testimony has to be well-founded so that the immigration authority finds it credible. Credibility assessment as a part of asylum procedure is especially challenging due to its target group; hearings are targeted to vulnerable people who are in “circumstances in which fraudulent applicants have an incentive to lie and genuine applicants may appear unconvincing” (Kagan 2010, 1183–85). Again – there is a risk that an asylum seeker uses fake proof and tries to convince authorities without acceptable reasons for international protection. Michael Kagan (2010) finds two kinds of credibility indicators that immigration authorities tend to use: external credibility assessment and internal credibility assessment. External credibility assessment refers to evidence that is somehow provable and verifiable such as official documents, reports about the country of origin or testimonies by other witnesses. Internal credibility assessment, however, is more complex. It includes applicant's oral testimony, written statements and other non-official personal documents. Religious-based claims are most often based on internal credibility assessment and are thus more sensitive (*ibid.*). This binary categorization can be also described as internal consistency and external consistency. Most often, asylum decisions are based on the internal consistency as it is unlikely that an asylum seeker has sufficient, verifiable documents supporting their claims (Kagan 2003, 367).

Credibility assessment on one's religious conviction is a challenging task that countries have tried to solve by creating and following different manuals. The United Nations Refugee Agency, UNHCR, has published a guideline for assessing the credibility of religious conversion. It is a general instruction that nation states then apply through their own legislation and judicial decisions. Common European Asylum System (CEAS) and European Asylum Support Office (EASO) have also guidelines for credibility assessment in general. Other less official actors have also produced material on general credibility assessment practices. For example, along with its project "CREDO – Improving credibility assessment in EU asylum procedures" that aimed to create a more structured credibility assessment practices in EU, Hungarian Helsinki Committee (2013) published a multidisciplinary training manual for asylum decision-makers and asylum professional. Some countries have also published their own asylum policy instructions regarding credibility assessment; for example, UK's Home Office published an asylum policy instruction (2015) about assessing credibility and refugee status that was targeted for asylum decision-makers in the UK²⁰.

In academic literature, there doesn't seem to be consensus on which element of the religion should the asylum officials focus during refugee status determination. Berlitz et al.²¹ (2015), an international group of refugee judges, state that the focus should be on the "inner", belief-based assessment. Thus, for example a baptism certificate and regular visits to a church should not be regarded sufficient. However, as Reinikka (2019) states, the whole concept of religion is so related to culture which is why religion is perceived and practiced differently depending on the country of origin: in Muslim cultures the "outer" ways of living religion can be more important than for example silent praying (which is often important for example in Finnish Lutheran culture). This is also supported by Roald's (2004, 11) notion on "the various degrees of Muslim-ness"; understanding the different ways of practicing any religion is one of the key elements of understanding religious conversion. It also goes well along with Barrett's (2017) conceptualization of belief-centred religious constructs. He states that modern religious self-understanding is mistakenly built on the strong idea of belief. According to Barrett (2017), overemphasizing the role of belief has affected the general understanding of religion. Thus, only by focusing on the inner experience of religion something deeply significant may

²⁰ UK's Home office's precedents have been regularly used as a legal reference in Nordic countries in the context of credibility assessment (Jansen & Spijkerboer 2011, 4). Also, Finland's Supreme Administrative Court has referred to UK Home Office's country reports when the cases have been about credibility assessment regarding for example sexual orientation (KHO:2012:1, KHO:2017:63, KHO:2017:148). UK's Home Office's effects on Finnish appellate asylum procedures could be studied further for example from the framework of synchronization of national policies.

²¹ Finland's Supreme Administrative Court also refers to the article in its precedential case where asylum seeker refers to his religious conversion as a claims for asylum (KHO:2017:63).

be left out. All in all, credibility assessment plays an initial and highly demanding part of refugee status determination. Besides, challenges of credibility assessment do not occur only in religious conviction but can appear in any claims that require personal inquiry of an identity²².

The overall role of religions has changed significantly in Europe besides the secularization trend that was earlier discussed. One of the main discussions about religion in contemporary society is how to distinguish religious and nonreligious. The key questions are often about the definition of religion and its borders; what belongs to the "proper sphere" of religion, what is "secular" and what kind of social action in general can be categorized as religion. (Beyer 2003, 51.) Asylum seekers who convert to Christianity make these borderlines visible: by challenging the traditional ways in which people usually become members of Christian churches²³ (for example via heritage and infant baptism in Evangelical Lutheran church), the converts bring new religious aspects that are assessed in the framework of Christianity and the "correct" way of practicing it. Similarly – Finnish Immigration Service along with Administrative and Supreme Administrative Courts, construct a certain image of what Christianity is and how it is practiced. This image is one example of the new migration knowledge that eventually manages certain, unwanted human mobility.

3.4 News media, asylum seekers and religion

When reading the news, the general scale of international migration might seem confusing. The images of asylum seekers crossing the Mediterranean combined with political anti-immigration rhetoric has built a picture of "masses" of people coming to Europe and Finland, regardless of the fact that most of migration remains still within the continent (Castles et al. 2009, 187). News media

²² Millbank (2009) has noticed that credibility assessment is especially difficult in cases regarding particular social groups, especially decisions made on the basis of sexual orientation. The difficulties arise due to the "gulf" between the knowledge base of the decision-maker but also their cultural frame that does not support understanding the experiences of the applicant who belongs to a particular social group. The 1951 Refugee Convention states that "As a result of events occurring before 1 January 1951 and owing to well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a **particular social group** or political opinion, is outside the country of his nationality and is unable or, owing to such fear, is unwilling to avail himself of the protection of that country; or who, not having a nationality and being outside the country of his former habitual residence as a result of such events, is unable or, owing to such fear, is unwilling to return to it."

²³ Even though trying to define religious conversion is not meaningful in the context of this study, it is worth noting that religious conversion in general has been conceptualized in various ways. The concept of alternation (see Traviassano 1970) addresses conversion as a process where an individual includes beliefs from the new religion into their "original" religion and conversion is more of a transformation than a radical change. Conversion can also happen more rapidly; the fast conversion has often been linked to Charismatic free movements where the role of experimental and radical conversion is usually more highlighted (Mantsinen 2015).

offers an arena where various portrayals and images of asylum seekers are expressed and circled, and where also different political discourses are contested.

The overall media portrayal of forced migration has become more and more negative in the 21st century. The attacks in the United States on 9th of September 2001 changed how journalists started to portray forced migrants from Middle Eastern and African countries; themes such as security, immigration and terrorism were connected to the same “multiculturalism” narrative (see Lentin & Titley 2011). Along with the “refugee crisis” in 2015, the media representations of asylum seekers became increasingly problem-oriented (Greussing & Boomgaarden 2017), and refugee crisis was established as its own concept that started to circulate also in Finnish news media. Casas-Cortes et al. (2015, 59) state that the term ‘crisis’ as an attribute for human mobility is not new as such; migration has been seen as problematic, societal change that needs certain methods of management and thus is something that causes crises. (ibid.) However, the refugee crisis as its own term in media was something of its own. By referencing to the 2015’s refugee and asylum trends as a ‘crisis’, news media prevented seeing the broader and deeper history of the earlier mentioned refugeedom and depicted forced migration as transitory and solvable (Gatrell 2016, 176).

Scholars have tried to analyse how and by whom the discourses around refugees and asylum seekers changed from a “migration crisis” to a “refugee crisis” in 2015 (Parker et al. 2018). One of the reasons presented is the role of photographs, and more specifically a photograph of one refugee: Alan Kurdi, three-year-old Syrian boy, who was found dead on the coast of Turkey. The photograph of his body quickly spread globally. It did not only cause media attention but also partially affected policy changes in Germany and the United Kingdom that promised to take in more Syrian refugees (Ibrahim 2018, 2). Parker et al. (2018) conducted a comparative research amongst UK, Norway and Australia about the change in discourse that happened before and after the publication of Kurdi’s photo. They noticed that in all of the countries the public discourse in newspapers changed the portrayal from a “migrant crisis” to a “refugee crisis”. Besides, the crisis was depicted as a crisis for Europe as in “Europe’s refugee crisis”. (Parker et al. 2018, 25.) This started to be a common framing for the refugee crisis in general: the borders and the security of European Union is in crisis – not the people who have fled.

There are certain key attributes that are often present in news reporting about asylum seekers. One of the most prominent portrayal of asylum seekers is relating them to different problems, threats, criminality and security issues (Esses et al. 2013; Greussing & Boomgaarden 2017). In Finnish

context, Karina Horsti (2005) has noticed that the most common frame in Finnish newspapers regarding asylum seekers is a combination of illegal and governmental frames. By illegal frame she refers to the journalistic tendency to make a connection between criminality and seeking asylum whereas criminality is an elemental feature that is attached to asylum seekers in news articles. Governmental frame is based on the notion that the government has the capability to take control over the administrative situation – the crisis that asylum seekers cause when entering inside borders of Finland. Asylum seekers are portrayed as a threat that only governmental practices can successfully solve. (ibid., 105–107.)

Asylum seekers are depicted as a group of substantially challenging people; they include characteristics that shake the national order of the receiving country due to their uprootedness (Malkki 1995). As Esses et al. (2013) have pointed out, the descriptive terms that are attached to asylum seekers in media are often related to uncertainty; spreading infectious diseases, possible terrorists disguised as asylum seekers entering Europe and the overall bogus nature of asylum seekers constructs a portrayal of an uneasy, unwanted group of people. The depiction of “enemies at the gate” that try to invade Western countries has been used to dehumanize asylum seekers and also grasp public’s attention (ibid.).

Dehumanization is related to another noteworthy feature of asylum reporting that is the portrayal of magnitude, the remarkable unavoidability that is caused by the “masses” of asylum seekers. Horsti (2006) noticed already in 2006 that the Finnish news coverage of African migrants who crossed Mediterranean addressed them by using nature-related vocabulary such as “waves” and “streams”. Refugees and asylum seekers were portrayed as “flows” coming to Europe or “floods” of people entering the sphere of Europe (ibid.). It is common to attach strong nature related metaphors to depict forced migration movements, and by portraying asylum seekers as an untamed force, media constructs an image of an uncontrollable, anonymous and dangerous group of people. (Gabrielatos & Baker 2008.) The concept of dehumanization is supported by Edward Said who has argued that Western people have actually already long before the 9/11 “othered” people that do not belong to the imaginary Western sphere. By categorizing people from non-Western countries as morally “bad” and excluding them from “good” Western cultures (Said 2011/1978), dehumanization of asylum seekers in media becomes more legitimized.

One important notion when mapping the media representations of asylum seekers is the role that is given to asylum seekers to speak for themselves. Asylum seekers themselves rarely have the access

to the “reasoning devices” as in the methods of how the problem, reason and solution are defined in the news articles (Horsti 2005, 278–279). Asylum seekers cannot represent themselves properly as the journalists made the representation about them by using their previous expectations about the narrative. Mervi Pantti and Markus Ojala (2019) analyzed practices that journalists use when telling asylum seekers’ personal stories, and noticed that even though journalists try to contest racism and discrimination against asylum seekers through giving media space for their stories, journalists also tend to reconstruct cultural, often xenophobic discourses that have already been produced. Thus, the professional conventions are thus not easily combined with the goals of giving voice to the vulnerable (ibid., 1044).

Religion-related phenomena, such as religious disputes or religious conversion, are often complex issues due to their spiritual nature. Religious conversion is one of the religion-related themes that has been covered when media has tried to make sense of increased visibility of Muslim asylum seekers. Disputes around Islamic scarf controversy in France (The Guardian 26.7.2013), banning the construction of minarets in Switzerland (Lentin & Titley 2011, 123) and now Muslim asylum seekers converting to Christianity in many European countries are just a few examples on how Muslims have been discursively turned into a problem or even a cultural threat all over Europe. The public discussion around Islam tends to follow the same path; Islam is a challenge that needs to be somehow solved. Also, in Finland, Islam has been mostly considered as a problematic religion. The media discourse paints often stereotypical picture and emphasizes problem-oriented issues, often relating to gender inequality or terrorism (Martikainen 2007, 253).

It seems that both asylum seekers and religion, especially when combined, are rarely discussed in a positive light in media. The news reporting is often somehow problem-oriented whether it is through a conflict frame or discussing asylum seekers as a threat or causing a crisis. This goes well with the common public idea of unwanted people or non-deserving group of people. However, news media offers only one public arena for discussing asylum seekers. It is also notable that the transnational digital social media environment with various social media channels and applications offer a new platform for looking at the public discussion around asylum seekers (Pantti 2016, 365).

4 Method and data

4.1 Frames and framing

As mentioned earlier, the broader framework for this study lies in the social constructionism where also the concepts relating to framing are strongly based on. In social life, in daily life interaction, different social categories and classifications are constantly present, and people use already existing labels to make interpretations of the situations they face. Questions like “What is happening and why?” and “What exactly is going on here?” occur when people encounter new situations. To answer these questions, people use their previous experiences and construct certain frames that help process the situations faster. People need to systematize social situations somehow; otherwise it is impossible to get a grasp on what is happening. Frames are one tool for this organization process. This can be seen as a foundation for Goffmanian tradition for frame analysis.

Framing as a concept is often traced back to the essay “A theory of play and fantasy” by Gregory Bateson (1955). He stated that arguments appearing in social interaction do not have elemental, actual meanings but the meanings are established in certain context (Vliegenthart & van Zoonen 2011, 103; Bateson 1955). Erving Goffman (1974/1986) took Bateson’s idea further. Goffman neither was interested in the core foundations of sociology such as social structures and organizations, but he was fascinated by the experiences that people have, the “second level matters” as Bennet Berger (1976, xvi) describes it. Following the broader tradition of the construction of realities (see James 1902; Schutz 1945), Goffman was motivated to find out how different realities are socially organized. To scrutinize this, he focused on small-scale situations in everyday life. This situational perspective offered a tool to look at the construction of certain moments and focus on the given *definition of the situation*. In the process of defining the situation, people tend to reflect their experiences in previous, similar settings.

Goffman (1974/1986, 21) stated that people have primary frameworks that they use as schemes to interpret life experiences and events. Besides, he emphasized that frames are likely to overlap, and individuals apply several different frames when assessing the situation (ibid., 25). Primary frameworks are divided into natural and social frameworks. Natural frameworks represent value-free, physical and determinist mode of being, such as the state of the weather, whereas social frameworks

prove structure for events that includes *motives and intents*, such as reporting of the weather (ibid., 22). These frameworks are, however, intertwined as well.

[...] although natural events occur without intelligent intervention, intelligent doings cannot be accomplished effectively without entrance into the natural order. (Goffman 1974/1986, 23.)

According to Goffman (1974/86, 63), frames are deeply institutionalized and cannot be traced back into individual's choices. He considers frames as independent and self-supporting set of thoughts that work in their own logic (ibid.). Framing is thus reciprocal: experiences are framed, but at the same time we frame experiences, as Gamson et al. (1992a, 384) later portray it. Thus, a successful frame operates in a subconscious level; frames seem so obvious that they cannot be understood in any other way. This is due to the "embeddedness" of frames in social culture. (Van Gorp 2006, 66.)

The embeddedness opens up the possible dual use of frames and frame analysis; framing can be seen as a theory on how individual people perceive reality, but also as a broader, methodological tool of looking at frames that take place in society and reconstruct our understanding of the world. This duality also brings up the challenge to give an exact definition for framing. Framing as a Goffmanian concept can be applied in cognitive psychology as a theory on how people process information (Pan & Kosicki 1993, 56). Concepts such as "schema" and "script" assume that knowledge is produced through certain cognitive structures that lead information processing (see Fiske & Taylor 1991). At the same time, looking at framing only through knowledge production does not necessarily give justice to the possibilities of frame analysis as a methodology that can scrutinize knowledge production in a societal level.

The methodological possibilities of frame analysis have sparked broad interest towards frames especially in different fields of social sciences. Frame analysis offers a useful framework for assessing various social situations, whether it is a face-to-face gathering or indirect communication. The theory has been applied in for example social movement studies (see Gamson 1992b) and policy research (see Schön & Rein 1994) but it has gained the most prominent popularity in the field of communication studies (see Tuchman 1978; Gitlin 1980, later Entman 1993; Scheufele 1999). The broad interest in frame analysis amongst communication scholars ended up in a significant peak in its application in communication research in the early 21st century. (Vliegenthart & Zoonen 2011, 102). One explanation for the popularity amongst communication scholars can be found on the frame analysis' possibility to assess the effects of the frames represented (Scheufele 1999). Frame analysis

enables to make a connection between the production and the reception of the news texts, and when scrutinized further, examining how the political actors affect journalistic practices, create certain frames and has an effect on audience interpretations can be also done (Carragee & Roefs 2004, 215). Thus, frame analysis offers a flexible tool for looking how media texts are constructed but also how they affect their audience.

Framing research has always had a close connection to other media research traditions, such as agenda-setting, priming but also discourse analysis. Scheufele (2000) has noted that frame analysis is its own method with its distinctive theoretical premises but is still related especially to agenda-setting and priming due to the similar goal of focusing on media effects. The premises of frame analysis are in social constructionism whereas agenda-setting and priming base more on causal reasoning: if agenda-setting is focused in salience of issues, framing is more interested in the presentation of issues (de Vreese 2005, 53). From another angle, agenda-setting can be seen as a first-level agenda setting whereas frame analysis as a second-level agenda-setting (Linström & Marais 2012, 22). Nonetheless, frame analysis and other qualitative analysis methods can and should be used together to supplement each other.

4.2 Frame analysis and news framing

Frame analysis has been particularly popular in studies regarding news, journalism and political communication. Frame analysis in these fields has been traditionally conducted in various ways which has also caused discussion about the accuracy of the method (Vliegenthart & Zoonen 2011). Despite the challenges of giving a specific definition for frames and framing in news media, frame analysis has the potential to somehow characterize the power of the communicating text (Entman 1993, 51). In his largely quoted article “Framing: Toward Clarification of a fractured paradigm”, Robert Entman (1993) opens up the concepts and application possibilities of frame analysis in the context of news media. Entman sees frames through *selection* and *salience*. Framing is selecting certain aspects of a certain reality, making them “more salient in a communicating text, in such a way as to promote a particular problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation, and/or treatment recommendation” (Entman 1993, 52). For Gitlin (1980), whose research about the relation between the news media and the Student New Left movement in the US has been influential in the development of frame analysis, media frames are “persistent patterns of cognition” that include interpretation, presentation, selection, emphasis and exclusion. Through these practices “symbol-

handlers” can organize visual and verbal discourses. Gitlin recalls that frames organize the world for both journalists and the ones that read and trust their reports. (ibid., 7.) As mentioned before, frames tend to regenerate and circulate well.

Frames take place in various parts of communication process and are hard to trace back into a single source. Entman (1993) has scrutinized the appearance of frames and states that frames can be tracked to at least to the communicator, the text, the receiver and the culture. The communicator decides what to say (based on their belief system) and the text produces the frame through certain details, such as key words, sources of information and stereotyped images. The receiver reflects the frames according to their previous experiences, and the culture can be seen as a set of the most common frames that appear in society. Regardless of the several locations, Entman (1993, 52–53) states that frames tend to function in a similar way; by selecting and highlighting certain aspects of reality. Frames define what is seen as a problem (usually based on common cultural values), what causes it, how to morally evaluate the problem and eventually how to solve it (ibid.).

Frame researchers tend to use different classifications for frames depending on the study objective. De Vreese (2005) has made a typology on how media researches use frames depending on the nature of the issue covered. He states that certain frames occur only depending on specific topics and events, and frames cannot be generally applied to all phenomena. He makes a distinction between issue-specific frames and generic frames (ibid., 55; 2002). Issue-specific frames allow researcher to take a deeper look to the details that the particular issue has, but also make the analysis more difficult to generalize. Generic frames focus more on the coverage of politics in general and journalistic conventions, norms and values. (de Vreese 2005, 56.)

An example of this generic frames studies is the work of Semetko and Valkenburg (2000) who conducted a content analysis on 2601 newspaper stories and 1522 television news stories around the Amsterdam meeting where European leaders met to discuss the establishment of the monetary union. They used a deductive approach and set a framework of five frames to analyse the data: conflict frame, human interest frame, economic consequences frame, morality frame and responsibility frame. They noticed that the most common frame was the attribution of responsibility frame, following the conflict and economic frames. The main result was, however, that the use of frames depends mostly on the type of the news media, not on the outlet (newspaper or television). Sensational and serious news outlets emphasize different frames; sensational media frames issues more through human interest frame, whereas serious media outlets stress more on the conflict and responsibility frames. (Semetko

and Valkenburg 2000.) The work of Semetko and Valkenburg (2000) has inspired other media researches as well, also related to religion-related news reporting (Fong & Ishad 2010). For example, Malaysian Yang Lai Fong and Md Sidin Ahmad Ishad (2010) conducted a frame analysis of the Lina Joy controversy in Malaysian Newspapers. Lina Joy converted from Islam to Christianity which caused a significant dispute in Malaysia. They applied frame analysis from a deductive perspective: they studied the appearance of the five frames by Semetko and Valkenburg (2000) and noticed that the conflict frame was clearly the most significant frame in all newspapers, followed by consequences and responsibility frames. Following strict deductive approach and generic frames, it is easier to make a comparison between the occurrence of certain frames, but it also might exclude some details that could be useful for the findings regarding certain issue-specific topics or events (de Vreese 2005, 54–60).

Regardless of the different frame typologies, a widely shared starting point for frame analysis is addressing framing as a process based on communication (de Vreese 2005; Scheufele 2000; Scheufele 1999). Framing process can be divided into frame-building and frame-setting. Frame-building refers to all the practices that journalists use when producing news. Frame-building is basically how frames emerge. Shoemaker and Reese (1996, 251–261) have pointed out that the number of factors influencing news content production and thus framing is remarkable. Journalists construct frames through their personal background (for example study history, attitudes, their own role conceptions), organizational and journalistic socialization and routines, pressures of extra-media groups such as political and economic sources and deviant ideologies. De Vreese (2005, 52) has compressed these factors into internal and external factors that influence journalistic practices. Especially the study of external factors or “frame sponsorship”, as Carragee and Roefs (2004, 219–220) define it, is important when tracing the political powers that have the resources to shape journalistic frames. Frame sponsorship refers to the specific sponsors that have economic and cultural resources to promote certain frames (*ibid.*, 219). Regarding frame sponsors, it is also important to make a distinction between framing by media and framing through media. For example, politicians answering questions from journalists get the chance to shape the representation of an event. Nonetheless, journalists make the choices whether to interview a politician or someone else. Journalistic practices effect the exact, final formulation of the key event. (Van Gorp 2006, 68–69.) In the end, frame-building is continuous interaction between journalists and external influencers, and this culminates into the frame manifest in text (de Vreese 2005, 52).

Frame-setting refers to the outcome of frame-building: what happens after the news are published. It includes all the interaction between media frames and a person's prior knowledge and schemes. The focus is on effects and consequences of media frames and how they affect a person's learning and evaluation of new life experiences. (de Vreese 2005, 52.) The consequences can be divided into individual and audience (or societal) level effects (ibid.; Scheufele 2000, 307). However, individuals process frames differently; frames can have a common effect on a receiving audience but finding a universal effect is implausible (Entman 1993, 54).

These effects have been increasingly under research in media studies (Vliegenthart & van Zoonen 2011, 109) which has also caused criticism about frames not being only aspects of content that cause media effects (Carragee & Roefs 2004, 215). Vliegenthart and Zoonen (2011, 111) emphasize that frames should not be considered to only affect individuals but to be seen more as a broader web of interactive and social interpretation of politics. Media frames are never neutral nor objective – they are always constructed according to someone's perspective and wishes. The power imprinted in frames should not be underestimated, as Carragee and Roefs (2004) underline. Alasuutari and Qadir (2014) also note that framing tends to underestimate the relation between the institutional environment and frame production. Framing easily mistakenly assumes that actors and their pre-assumptions of the world are not related to the actual construction of frames (ibid., 68). This is where epistemic governance approach comes useful – it fills the gap between an actor and frames by emphasizing the actors' deep-seated values, that are based on certain notions of social world. Epistemic governance puts emphasis on the connection between the actor and their understanding of the social world and how it affects the construction and circulating of frames.

Frame analysis as a qualitative social scientific research method in communication studies is not always a black and white tool and it also has caught a lot of critical attention, especially about its recent developments. Many challenges in frame analysis lie in conceptual matters. Defining frame and framing can be difficult and the definitions might vary depending on the study and its purposes, and sometimes frames are reduced into only story topics and issue positions. (Vliegenthar & van Zoonen 2011; Carragee & Roefs 2004, 217–218.) According to Carragee and Roefs (2004, 216–217), this is troubling because of the origins of frame analysis in communication research – the purpose has been to discover the economic, political and cultural resources that shape the production of frames, not only find out topic-based specific categorizations. Without acknowledging the frame sponsorship, it is not possible to scrutinize the forces that operate behind frames. (ibid.) De Vreese (2005, 51–52) has also noted that framing studies often focus on either aforementioned topic-based content

categorizations or framing effects. However, frame analysis should be a combination of both; a process that includes the assessment of the frame production and the content itself but also the societal consequences of frames.

Frames are always based on the current values and norms in the society. Nonetheless, public discourse and frames should be studied historically, or at least by acknowledging the broader, historically constructed story behind a certain news story (Gamson 1992b, 25). William Gamson (1992b) studied frames appearing around Israeli-Arab conflict in 1990s but noted that the roots of the conflict are basically 2000 years old. Research is always selecting some aspects of a wide, complicated set of different realities. Even though asylum seekers converting to Christianity in Finland can seem a relatively narrow and specific issue, the phenomenon can be linked to the discussions and connections that world religions have always had; what divides the world religions, what kind of believers belong to each religion and how do people “outside” these religions portray them.

As mentioned, there are basically two ways of approaching news content in frame analysis: inductive and deductive. Inductive one requires an open approach to the news reports, and the idea is not to follow strictly any previous findings on most common frames but rather looking at the data with very loose preconceptions. (Semetko & Valkenburg 2000, 94.) Another way of looking at the news story is from a deductive perspective, by applying some most common frames appearing in the news production. In this study, combining inductive and deductive approach comes useful. I wish to look at the data without strict pre-assumptions but also note whether the news articles repeat the similar ways of discussing asylum seekers than previous studies have shown. As the media coverage of religious conversion amongst asylum seekers in secular news media has not been studied in Finland yet, strict assumptions should not be made beforehand to get the clearest picture of the current news reporting. Besides, due to the marginal nature of the phenomenon, the overall media coverage has been relatively small, and it is reasonable to take a look at the data without trying to fit it to certain common categories. On the other hand, previous research on framing asylum seekers in Finnish news articles guides the analysis, and literature on governmentality leads to look especially at the question of authority and epistemic layer of the news articles.

4.3 Data set

4.3.1 General features

The main data consists of 67 news articles that were published online between 2015 and 2019 in the official websites of the chosen news outlets. I have included all the news reports, articles, news stories, opinions, op-eds and editorials that have addressed the theme of religious conversion of asylum seekers in Finland. I have excluded articles that have dealt with the topic only partially for example news reports concerning asylum seekers credibility assessment in general or other credibility assessment that requires specific expertise, such as age determination or sexual orientation. Media has been covering credibility assessment as a part of asylum procedure from various angles but the news reports about religious conversion as an asylum claim can be distinguished as its own theme.

All of the chosen news outlets are newspapers that publish news both as a printed newspaper but also online, except for Yleisradio, which is the national broadcasting company of Finland. Yleisradio has been covering the topic most extensively. Yle Uutiset, the news branch of Yleisradio, has published 14 articles that are related to religious conversion. Helsingin Sanomat, the largest circulating daily newspaper in Finland, has covered the topic almost as extensively as Yle Uutiset, with 9 articles. As asylum seekers have been converting to Christianity all around Finland, not only around the capital, I wanted to include some more local newspapers in my data set. Aamulehti is the biggest daily newspaper in Pirkanmaa area, the second biggest region in Finland in terms of population. Satakunnan Kansa, Turun Sanomat and Länsi-Suomi are focused in the news reporting of South West Finland, whereas Kaleva and Lapin Kansa represent the northern part of Finland. Keski-suomalainen serves central Finland and Savon Sanomat, Karjalainen and Lappeenrannan Uutiset focus on reporting issues concerning Eastern Finland. Iltalehti has the largest circulation amongst tabloids and is widely read all around Finland. Maaseudun Tulevaisuus covers mainly news on agriculture but due to the large national circulation it has also a significant role in Finland's newspapers scene. (Media Audit Finland 2018.) In my analysis, I have shortened the names of the journals so that YLE stands for Yle Uutiset, HS for Helsingin Sanomat, AL for Aamulehti, etc.

At first, I tried to organize the data simply based on the type of the news: editorials, opinions, news reports and feature stories. However, I noticed that most of the news reports and feature stories include elements of information-based factual reporting but also humane stories and "episodic"

descriptions of asylum seekers conversion experiences. As Reinmann et al. (2011, 233) note in their definition for hard and soft news, one of the main elements distinguishing them is emotion. Hard news is unemotional and impersonal whereas soft news is more emotional and personal. Many of the news reports and feature stories (for example YLE2., YLE3., HS1., HS2.) included both elements; they included for example fact boxes that explained shortly and simply the administrative and judicial background of the phenomenon (“a group of Muslim asylum seekers are converting to Christianity – the conversion usually happens after a negative asylum decision”). In addition, they contained personal stories of asylum seekers (for example Sardar in HS2.; Maisun Al-Muhammadawi in YLE11.) that were portrayed in a highly personal way, describing the hardness that asylum seekers might face if they get deported after their conversion to Christianity. All in all, the news reports and feature stories were rarely clearly distinguishable and included both soft and hard news elements.

Table 1. Type of the news articles in the data

Type of the news articles	N
Editorial	4
Opinion	5
News reports and feature stories	58
Altogether	67

Most of the news articles were news reports and feature stories. Four editorials were published in Satakunnan Kansa (SK1.), Savon Sanomat (SK3.), Lappeenrannan Uutiset (LU2.) and Iltalehti (IL6.), and five opinions in Maaseudun Tulevaisuus (MT3.), Länsi-Suomi (LS2.), Turun Sanomat (TS2.), Satakunnan Kansa (SK2.) and Helsingin Sanomat (HS9.). This geographical extent of the opinions and editorials might give a hint of the national scope of the phenomenon; conversions did not take place only around Helsinki region and thus showing in Helsingin Sanomat, but it was widely reported and caused discussion all the way from Southern to Northern parts of Finland. News reports and feature stories occur as well in all chosen national news outlets.

Newspapers publish different types of texts with different targets and target groups. For example, I do not assume that the Yle Uutiset and Iltalehti have similar frames as their targets are somewhat different – Yle Uutiset focusing more on serious news reporting whereas Iltalehti being often seen as a more sensational and commercial news media. As Semetko and Valkenburg (2000) have noticed, the use of frames has a connection to the type of the news outlet in terms of “seriousness”. Serious news outlets emphasize the responsibility and conflict frames whereas more sensational newspapers

often stress the human-interest frame. (ibid.) However, as my purpose is to make an overview of the media frames, I find it important to include data examples that are different from each other and by doing this also avoid constructing an idea of “high” and “low” journalistic culture (Zelizer ix, 2000).

Some of the news articles in the data are relatively short and fact-based. It makes the frame analysis slightly different than for instance analysing long, story-based feature articles. In the short news stories the content is limited and the perspective needs to be compressed into more basic questions, such as “What events are newsworthy?” and “Through which events are asylum seekers generally framed?” (Horsti 2005, 104). This study will follow Horsti’s idea that short news stories can offer another type of results and open up some fundamental choices that journalists have made when having decided the newsworthy issues regarding asylum seekers.

I have not faced ethical considerations or research permits when collecting the data as the data is available online. In this study, I am aware of the risks of reproducing certain imageries when using media texts that are known of portraying asylum seekers in a certain way. At the same time, by only using public open data, I wish not to make the position of asylum seekers any more complicated.

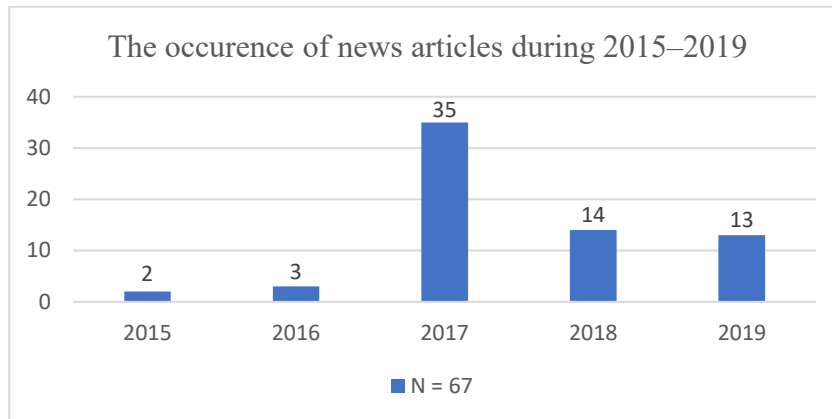
4.3.2 The phases of reporting in 2015–2019

The chosen time span is years 2015–2019. The public discussion around the phenomenon started properly in 2017 when religious conversion as an asylum claim started to play bigger role in asylum decisions and appeals, and the church communities and politicians started to take a public stand on the topic. Majority of the news articles have thus been published in 2017 and 2018, but the discussion has been going on since. The oldest news article included in the data set was published in 4th of November 2015 (TS1.) and the most recent is from 28th of September in 2019 (IL1.).

In 2015 and 2016, altogether five articles were published in the chosen news outlets. As Table 2. shows, approximately half of the articles (N = 35) were published in 2017. 14 articles were published in 2018, and 13 articles in 2019. The appearance of news reports follows events that caught public attention. In 2015 and 2016, when the number of religious conversions was still relatively small, the articles did not have a thematic coherence which eventually changed in 2017. In 2017, three main peaks in news reporting can be noted: one in the end of April, second in August and the last one in October. However, 2017 was an overall active year and the news reporting happened during the year,

except for the first few and the few last months of the year. In 2018, the number of articles dropped significantly: 14 articles were published with a peak in January (N = 5). In 2019, the news reporting remained at the same level. Majority of the news in 2019 took place in May (N = 5) and late August (N = 7).

Table 2. The number of articles that were published in the chosen news outlets



In 2017, when the news reporting was at its highest, the main peaks took place along with certain events. In April, news reports dealt with the theme based on two different approaches. The former president of Finland, Tarja Halonen (Helsingin Sanomat 22.4.2017), had published an op-ed regarding deportations and their illegality. She stated that Finland should not deport former Muslims who have converted to Christianity, not because of their Christianity but because of the risk that apostasy might cause in their countries of origins. As these statements were published in Finland's biggest daily circulating newspaper by an ex-president, it caused various reactions. For example, Matti Vanhanen, the chairperson of the Parliament's Foreign Affairs Committee during that time, disagreed with Halonen's viewpoint and stated that Finland should not make up new criteria for granting asylum or create more pulling factors for asylum seekers for coming to Finland (Ylen Ykkösaamu 22.4.2017; MT4., YLE15.). Päivi Nerg, the Undersecretary of the Ministry of Interior, was interviewed by Yle Uutiset (YLE16.) about her thoughts on how the Finnish case law will eventually form regarding the credibility assessment practices of religious conversion as an asylum claim. The opinion by former president Halonen also sparked other opinions that journals published (i.e. HS9). Even though Halonen mostly emphasized the importance of stopping deportations, her opinion can also be seen as having affected to a broader discussion of asylum procedures and also thus credibility assessment of religious conversion regarding to it.

Another media peak in April 2017 can be located together with the precedent that the Supreme Administrative Court published in 21st of April (KHO:2017:63). The precedent was about an Iranian asylum seeker who had converted to Christianity after a negative asylum decision and had asked for an oral hearing for the reassessment. The Administrative Court had not arranged an oral hearing but instead granted an asylum for him only based on his written documents. Finnish Immigration Service, who had given the original negative asylum decision, appealed the case to the Supreme Administrative Court for getting a prejudicial decision on the assessment of religious conversion. The Supreme Administrative Court decided that an oral hearing must be arranged in order to assure the proper way of assessing the credibility of religious conviction. According to the press release that the Supreme Administrative Court published regarding to the precedent (KHO 21.4.2017), 31 similar leaves to appeal were granted in similar cases for Afghan, Iraqi and Iranian asylum seekers. The precedent caused wide media attention all over Finland (for example HS8., TS3., SS2., LS3., KS1., LK2.).

The third peak in news reporting relating to converted asylum seekers in 2017 can be linked to the end of summer and early autumn in 2017 but with more diverse themes. The discussion had started earlier in spring, but new phase included news reports from wider perspective from the challenges that the increased number of leaves to appeal (due to the sur place religious conversion) has caused to the asylum processing times (YLE4., YLE5.) to short, statistic-based articles about the asylum seekers appealing to Administrative courts (KAL2., TS4., MT2.). Also, the appeal that the over 400 priests had given to Finnish Immigration Service was reported (YLE14.).

In 2018, the news reports were mostly published during the first half of the year. The news reports were more diverse and concerned more various themes; one common theme that circulated amongst newspapers (KAR1., MT5., HS6.) was about religious conversion being a new claim for seeking asylum after a negative asylum decision. More reports were also written from different congregations, for example Helsingin Sanomat (4.3.2018) published a long feature article that focused on describing the work of different small Charismatic congregations and how the joining process of asylum seekers take place. The phenomenon was not discussed only as a political issue, but journalists continued to do more story-based articles that told individual asylum seekers experiences.

Last year, in May 2019, a precedent by the Supreme Administrative Court (KHO:2019:18) caused media attention in the chosen news outlets. Especially Iltaalehti was interested in the case (IL5., IL6., IL7.). The Editor-in-Chief of Iltaalehti, Mika Koskinen, wrote an editorial (IL6.) concerning the legal

process of the case, and concluded that Finland does not need more “pulling factors” (houkutustekijä) for asylum seekers and referred to the SAC’s decision to return the application to the Finnish Immigration Service for reassessment that basically automatically leads to a positive asylum decision. Another case that spread in national media outlets in late 2019 (HS2., IL8., IL9.), was the case of Sardar, an Iranian asylum seeker who was an active participant in Kemijärvi congregation²⁴.

Already the general features of the data reveal some broader trajectories from the phenomenon and the news reporting around it. The first published article in 2015 deals with the group of asylum seekers’ rising interest of converting to Christianity. The article states that about twenty asylum seekers have showed their interest towards converting to Christianity of which eight are going to a confirmation school and three want to get baptized. On the contrary, the most recent news article, published in *Iltaalehti* (28.9.2019), is a news report about the response by Minister of Interior, Maria Ohisalo (The Green League), to the Chairperson of The True Finns (Perussuomalaiset), Jussi-Halla-aho. Halla-aho had stated that asylum seekers get positive asylum decisions too easily by taking advantage of the possibility of appealing the negative asylum decision to a higher court. Ohisalo called this argument “irresponsible” and stated that Finnish Immigration Service professionals has better expertise to assess religious conversation than politicians. By comparing the content of these two articles it is easy to see the course of the reporting that reflects the phenomenon: at first, only about twenty asylum seekers getting interested in Christianity caught media attention. Five years later, politicians argue on the legal procedures of how the asylum process should be held regarding claims based on religious conversion.

5 Findings

The overall change in the news reporting shows the expansion of the phenomenon; it started as a marginal phenomenon regarding small Christian communities and ended up being discussed in a legal and political level, while catching media attention. Through the data, I scrutinize the discussion further by answering the following questions: What are the frames in Finnish media regarding asylum seekers who convert to Christianity? Who is interviewed, and who is seen as an expert when

²⁴ Kemijärvi congregation has played a comparatively significant role in the chosen media outlets, considering the size of the commune. *Yle Uutiset* interviewed the Vicar Pentti Tepsa already in March 2017 (YLE1.), and the latest news from Kemijärvi took place in August 2019 (HS3.).

discussing religious conversion? What kind of statements have the experts given, and what is the portrayal of the expert?

I have categorized my findings into three main frames with altogether six themes that were discussed in the news articles. In the first frame, I will introduce asylum seekers' religious conversion as a threatening, suspicious act that shakes Finnish society. Second frame focuses on religious conversion as an authoritative disagreement between the state and church and also between different Christian movements. Lastly, I will bring up the morality frame that addresses the phenomenon from the perspective of helping victims and depicts the phenomenon as a human rights issue.

5.1 Threatening conversion

The asylum process regarding issues of faith includes problems and different viewpoints.²⁵ (LU1.)

One thing that is also being discussed in the Ministry of the Interior concerns the asylum seekers who have converted from Islam to Christianity. According to Nerg, the question is very difficult for any religion. (MT4.)

Some asylum seekers are claimed to have converted to Christianity in order to get granted asylum in Finland more easily. The leader of the Pentecostal Church admits that such a possibility exists. (HS7.)

Problems, difficulties and possible misuses – the portrayal of religious conversion and new converts is most of all linked to some sort of alarming unbalance. The core problem that causes this disturb is the overall existence of asylum seekers and their misbehaviour. In threatening conversion frame, the threat is based on some elemental features that are attached to asylum seekers, not to the actual conversion as a religious process or their inner conviction in general. However, by converting to Christianity, asylum seekers cause significant societal threat. By threat, I don't refer to an actual, concrete or physical threat but more of a broad set of negative attributes that are attached to converted asylum seekers and are thought to cause shaking societal reactions. To illustrate the threat frame, I have categorized the frame into two themes regarding the cautious features that are attached to converted asylum seekers.

²⁵ All the data samples are self-translated.

5.1.1 Sincerity

Asylum seekers, who have converted to Christianity in Finland, are often essentialized as somehow suspicious and dishonest group of people. They are continually portrayed of being prepared to conduct illegal acts. The salience of credibility assessment in most of the articles shows the sincerity frame at its purest. The role of credibility assessment is seen particularly important and necessary due to the possible misuse of the Finnish asylum system. Asylum seekers are depicted as somehow untrustworthy when it comes to assessing the evidence they present for the grounds of seeking asylum.

An exceptionally large number of asylum seekers have converted to Christianity in Kemijärvi. Altogether 23 have been baptized and a few are still in confirmation school. The converts are from Iraq, Afghanistan, Syria and Iran. According to Vicar Pentti Tepsa, the conversions are not aimed at affecting positive asylum decisions. “We have made it clear from the beginning that by converting to Christianity one cannot affect the Finnish authorities.” (YLE1.)

The basic assumption that appears in the news articles is that religious conversion is somehow automatically a method that asylum seekers use to “trick” the asylum procedure. As the example above shows, the phenomenon is often discussed in a seemingly neutral way; at first, the extent of the religious conversion amongst asylum seekers is mapped through localising and counting the converted asylum seekers. Then, the sudden quotation from the vicar, Pentti Tepsa, reveals the assumption of what religious conversion actually is: an illegitimate way of trying to affect Finnish authorities. However, Tepsa reassures that illegitimate behaviour is not accepted, and Christianity cannot be used for cheating in asylum procedure.

Another way of emphasizing the suspicious or illegal nature of religious conversion is by highlighting the moment when the religious conversion has happened. If the religious conversion has taken place after a negative asylum decision, it is particularly conspicuous. These two examples below give an example of a typical structure of how the timing of the conversion is highlighted. The subtle choices of words and expressions, such as “conversion comes up at this phase” and “conversion is most of all used as a new criterion for seeking asylum” portray religious conversion mostly as a method that asylum seekers use to cheat the entire asylum system. This pictures asylum seekers as a somehow calculating group of people – they know Finland’s legislative system and asylum practices so well that they can count different techniques in order to enhance their possibilities for a positive asylum decision.

In the most common cases, the asylum seeker has already gotten a negative decision, against which the applicant has appealed to the Administrative Court. – At this point, then, the conversion to Christianity arises and is brought to Administrative Court. Also, the baptism certificate has been submitted to the court, says Anu Karppi (Migri). The Administrative Court then returns the asylum case to the Finnish Immigration Service for reconsideration. In this case, the agency is obliged to find out this ground for asylum, and it cannot base its decision only on a baptism certificate or statement issued by the parish, for example. (YLE11.)

“Conversion is used particularly as a new ground for asylum when appealing against a negative asylum decision. In other words, the applicant has first applied for asylum on some other grounds”, Forssell (Migri) says. “Then, when they appeal the negative decision to the administrative court, they mention as new information that they have converted to Christianity and presents a new statement, such as a baptism certificate.” (HS1.)

Even though counting certain words or expressions is not typical for frame analysis, it is descriptive that the word “motive” or “motives” appears overall 22 times in the news articles. Questioning the motives behind religious conversion guides one to think that there is a risk behind the conversion: it may not be based on the motives that it should be based on. Again – by focusing on certain, “wrong”, motives of asylum seekers, the portrayal ends up highlighting the insincere nature of asylum seekers. The motives are being questioned from Finnish Immigration Service, Christian leaders and communities, politicians and also others that have been interviewed. However, the attitude towards motives varies depending on the authority. Finnish Immigration Service officials portray “acceptable” motives for conversion stricter than for example church representatives. Church representatives admit that there is a risk that some asylum seekers have dubious motives for joining congregations, but some of them also emphasize the importance of understanding the different motives for conversion and participating church services. Religious leaders seem to be overall more open and flexible for accepting different motives for religious conversion than the state officials. Finnish Immigration Service sees the motives for conversion as a more concrete question of belief: whether an asylum seeker is personally a Christian or not.

Asylum seekers who are baptized in the Elävä Sana congregation have to attend an Alpha course [Alfa-kurssi]. After that, they will also be interviewed, says Pastor Pia Hackzell. “We try to pick out those who are not converting for the right motives. I believe that the motives can also change.” (HS5.)

Different explanations are given for the motives behind conversions. Finnish Immigration Service has a clear picture of what is a good and a right motive and what is a dubious and a wrong one. According to Finnish Immigration Service, conversion to Christianity should happen through

personal, religious motives, not for example only based on wanting to belong to a Christian community. Tirsa Forssell, the Head of the Asylum Results Division Unit, brings up the risk that asylum seekers do not convert to Christianity with legitimate motives. Finding a community and friends is portrayed as a risk to the asylum procedure that should focus on assessing the credibility of the religious conversion. Forssell assumes that “a sense of belonging and friends” are not an element of a true religious conviction and do not fit in the sphere of “right motives”. Vice versa – Vicar Kari Mäkinen states that motives for joining Christian congregations and conversion to Christianity can be indeed based on communal experiences and should thus not be questioned. These kinds of debates are prevalent in the news articles and represent the challenges that these two ontological authorities face when trying to make sense of the “real” motives.

According to Kari Mäkinen, the motive may be based on how people (asylum seekers) have been received in the congregations. Some asylum seekers have reported converting to Christianity, which has raised doubts about their motives. "Of course, there can be many motives, but their way of becoming Christians should still not be questioned", says Kari Mäkinen. (MT1.)

“There is also a risk that asylum seekers seek a sense of belonging and friends. It is hard to assess if the conversion is real”, Forssell (Migri) says. (AL1.)

Along with motives, also the truthfulness of evidence is being discussed and questioned in the news articles. In the sincerity frame, the problem lies in the possible false nature of the religious conversion that cannot be methodologically detected by authorities. The key question for many news articles is how to make sure that the evidence an asylum seeker presents is trustworthy. What evidence should be appreciated and trusted the most? Words and expressions, such as “proof” (näyttö) and “evidence” (todiste) refer to a need to get some objective, trustful confirmation to support the positive asylum decision based on religious claims. If there is not enough credible evidence, asylum decision could be based on illegal premises.

According to Vicar Huhtala, Finnish Immigration Service has emphasized that the testimony of a representative of a religious group cannot be considered as convincing evidence of the asylum seeker's conviction, referring to her statement on the authenticity of the faith. According to Huhtala, the agency has also stated that local religious communities organize systematic conversion work amongst asylum seekers. Kaisa Huhtala questions Finnish Immigration Service's ability to assess the convictions of asylum seekers only based on hearings. (YLE10.)

The offered solutions for tracing the real motives and true evidence vary greatly. In some news articles, the role of immigration service officials at noticing fake conversions and thus insincere behaviour is

emphasized, but some suggest that the church is responsible for ensuring that no bogus asylum seeker gets the evidential support from church in the asylum procedure. Some, especially sensational news articles, blame courts for not questioning the sincerity of the story that asylum seeker represents as an evidence. For example, Mika Koskinen, the Editor-in-Chief of *Iltaalehti* (IL6.) suggests that one is able to notice the suspicious evidence and illegal behaviour with just common sense. In addition, according to Koskinen, courts are actually supporting the illegal behaviour by granting asylum on insincere reasons. The example also implicates that an asylum seeker could take advantage of the asylum system by intentionally trying to *improve* their grounds for asylum. The idea of one “improving their possibilities to get granted an asylum” portrays an asylum seeker as a person who plays games with the asylum system and by manipulating the grounds, they can increase the odds for a positive asylum decision.

The precedent by Super Administrative Court means that from now on, an asylum seeker who has converted to Christianity can improve their possibilities to get granted an asylum, when they send the information to the country of origin.

[...]

It is strange that the Supreme Court did not question the sincerity of the appellant's story, even though the story was constantly changing. Many ordinary citizens may be left wondering whether it is a matter of misunderstanding or even providing background support for converting to Christianity as a good ground for asylum. (IL6.)

Sincerity frame can be linked to the broader concept of illegality, bordering practices and securitization. The frame is prevalent when news articles describe various processes of asylum procedure and religious conversion. The insincerity actualizes within all the actors that have contact with asylum seekers; all of them need to be somehow on their toes in order to notice possible misuse and illegal actions. There is a risk that that asylum seekers try to take advantage of blue-eyed Finnish immigration authorities but also church officials. Asylum seekers are constantly under surveillance so that they do not do anything suspicious, anything that could lead them breaking the Finnish law and confusing the national order. This can be seen particularly vividly from the comments of politicians.

The politicians discuss the possible misuse of Christian belief as a claim for asylum especially as a threat for Finnish nation state. The Head of the True Finns Party, Jussi Halla-aho, stated that “our judiciary” clogs due to the asylum seekers who “decide to convert to Christianity”. The Ministry of Interior, Maria Ohisalo (The Green Party), argued back that Finland is not a country that restricts freedom of religion (IL1.). Both of the politicians reflect the situation by making a connection to

Finland and its legal system and how it works: Halla-aho sees it being under threat due to mistrustful asylum seekers, whereas Ohisalo emphasizes the strength of Finland in terms of offering asylum to the ones in need. Thus, Finland as a nation-state is like a mirror to which illegality is politically reflected.

“When a person receives a negative decision, they complain about it which takes time because our judiciary is congested in dealing with these complaints. After receiving a final negative decision after a round of appeals, he decides to become homosexual or convert to Christian and seek asylum again”, Halla-aho said at Yle. Ohisalo was asked at Ykkösaamu what kind of information she has about the matter and how many of the rejected asylum seekers convert to Christianity or state that they are gay. “Maybe I’d ask if you can convert to gay. I also ask if Finland is a country where freedom of religion is a matter up to the Constitution. I think that Finland is not a country where we start to restrict people’s religious freedoms”, Ohisalo said. (IL1.)

Finland as a nation-state is often portrayed as an antidote to insincere and illegal asylum seekers especially in the comments of politicians. Both left and right-wing politicians (for example, Ohisalo and Halla-aho in the example above) state that Finland as a country should be able to tackle insincere behaviour. However, they justify their arguments with different grounds. Halla-aho states that “our” judicial system is currently offering illegal methods for entering Finland, whereas Ohisalo argues that Finland as a country respecting religious freedom is trustworthy and able to identify possible bogus asylum seekers. Thus, both of the politicians build up their ontological authority based on their knowledge about Finnish nation-state. However, the core values they refer to are opposite: Halla-aho finds that Finland’s jammed legislative system is in trouble and should be protected, whereas Ohisalo emphasizes that Finland as a country should be able to protect asylum seekers.

The common worry about Finland being too “attractive” is also a prevalent way of discussing Finland and insincere asylum seekers. Finland does not want to seem attractive to possible bogus asylum seekers as asylum seekers substantially include the possibility of misuse of Finland’s asylum system. The idea of attractiveness also includes an assumption that there might be factors that pull asylum seekers to certain countries. For example, Matti Vanhanen (The Centre Party), the Head of Committee for Foreign Affairs, has stated that “new criteria” (referring to granting asylum based on conversion to Christianity) should not be made to assure that no new “pulling factors” (vetovoimatekijä) would guide asylum seekers to Finland. Vanhanen builds up his knowledge on Finnish authorities: he states that Finnish officials have the best possible knowledge about the deportations, and he has not heard statements from officials regarding need for a policy change. Thus, he leans his argument on factual, scientific reasoning. Another example of the attractiveness is by Minister of Interior Kai Mykkänen

(National Coalition Party), who also reassured that even though Supreme Administrative Court had made a precedent regarding converted asylum seekers, Finland is still not *too* attractive.

Vanhanen says in TV1's Ykkösaamu that new criteria for granting a residence permit should not be made. – I would be very careful to change such principles. We should also not make new pulling factors in here. I would not advocate making new criteria for the evaluation process, he says. (YLE15.)

The Minister (Mykkänen) does not believe that due to the precedent by Supreme Administrative Court, Finland would seem as a more attractive destination in the eyes of asylum seekers. (IL7.)

Relating to the dishonesty and illegal behaviour, especially illegality plays a role to the other direction as well: the “illegality” where a nation-state falls when preventing the asylum based on religious conversion. Thus, the accusation for illegality is not present only when discussing asylum seekers, but also assessing the Finnish immigration policy towards news converts. Especially the church representatives emphasize the threat that immigration service builds for the converted Christian asylum seekers who are deported. Finnish Immigration Service causes worry and sadness amongst people who have been closely related to the deported asylum seekers.

The congregation of Kemijärvi has been experiencing deep sadness during the last few weeks. The congregation's “own son”, Iranian Sardar, 33, was detained in July to wait for forced return to his country of origin. The decision to remove him from the country has been seen unfair in Kemijärvi. Many of the local people know Sardar as an active Christian and there is great concern about him. (HS2.)

The accusation for Finland's illegal behaviour is also prevalent in the comments of Päivi Räsänen, the Head of Christian democrats. She states that Finnish Immigration Service has caused life threat for deported converted Christians. She left a written question for the Parliament in order to assure that Finland respects international human rights and supports freedom of religion. In this case, Finland as a nation-state is portrayed as a cause of possible illegality and misuse of asylum procedures.

Päivi Räsänen, the Chairman of the Christian Democrat parliamentary group, submitted a written question to the Government on Wednesday about the assessment of the convictions of Muslims who have converted to Christianity. Räsänen refers to the cases that have arisen in which Finnish Immigration Service has questioned the authenticity of the convictions of asylum seekers who have converted to Christianity and been baptized and denied them asylum in Finland. (IL4.)

This two-fold occurrence of sincerity theme demonstrates the broader, deep-seated threat frame. Insincerity, dishonesty and illegality are not only the features of asylum seekers, but more of a set of inevitable aspects that is related to all of their action and actors that work with them – asylum seekers somehow cause societal threat just by existing.

5.1.2 Economic burden

One element that rises from the news articles is the emphasis on economic concerns relating to converted asylum seekers. Economic burden frame includes all the references to the possible expenses that asylum seekers cause when converting to Christianity. These expenses occur mainly due to the appeals or new asylum applications that converted asylum seekers cause as more administrative resources are needed to proceed the appeals. Economic burden frame includes references to state budget, the cost of judicial procedures, recruitment of new work force for Finnish Immigration Service and the overall portrayal of asylum seekers as an economic, countable “phenomenon”. For example, words that implicate some kind of rush or jam and are connected to economic issues, easily portray converted asylum seekers as an economic trouble that requires quick reaction in order to maintain economic stability.

According to Ohisalo, the processing of asylum and residence permits will be speeded up and the application jam will be solved, for which Finnish Immigration Service will receive additional funding of 13 million euros next year. (IL1.)

One way of noticing the economic frame is by focusing on quotations by politicians. Prime Minister Juha Sipilä (The Centre Party) was concerned about the increased number of appeals and stated that it would cause an “appeal jam” (valitusruuhka). Sipilä wanted to shorten the processing times of asylum applications and ensure that everything possible is done in order to speed up the asylum processes. The news article emphasized that even though Supreme Administrative Court would work efficiently, conversions to Christianity would slow them down. The Head of Department Kari Kiesiläinen from the Ministry of Justice was interviewed in the same news article (YLE4.) and he emphasized that more resources should be put on handling the appeals if the asylum processes need to be faster. Kiesiläinen stressed that if the number of asylum seekers who use religious conversion as a ground for seeking asylum remains high, the budget for different courts is insufficient. Leena Meri (The True Finns) has similar worries; she states that converting to Christianity is not credible and it causes an endless loop of appeals (valituskierre) in different legal stages.

Even if the administrative courts act effectively, the conversions of many asylum seekers to Christianity will slow them down. A change of religious conviction is brought up when a negative asylum decision is appealed to an administrative court. – A religious conviction has come as a surprise. The number of these is quite big at the moment. As a result, the processing time will grow, the degree of difficulty of the cases will increase, and, for example, oral proceedings will have to be held in the administrative court, Kiesiläinen lists. If there are many appellants who have changed their religion, the funding for the courts is not enough, according to Kiesiläinen. A total of approximately 30 million euro has been prepared for handling complaints in 2016–2018. (YLE4.)

A sudden conversion to Christianity or a change in sexual orientation does not seem credible for Meri. She wants to limit the possibility to change the reasoning. Meri finds it problematic that the cycle of appeals to varying court degrees can be virtually endless. (LU4.)

Economic burden frame can be noticed also from the statistical portrayal of asylum seekers. Numbers are used to make an overall depiction of the phenomenon but also to emphasize the significant number of negative asylum decisions that are expensive for the state due to appeals. “Hundreds of asylum seekers have changed their religion”, “Hundreds of asylum seekers have converted to Christianity” and “Hundreds of asylum seekers have joined Pentecostal congregations in the past years” are examples of the titles that emphasize the statistical occurrence. Especially the estimation of the numbers of converted asylum seekers that are attached to possible increase in appeal procedures easily portrays an idea of an unpredictable group of asylum seekers who cost money.

There are now about a thousand asylum seekers who have converted to Christianity. The majority of the cases are men who came from Iraq in 2015. A large number of asylum seekers arrived in late 2015 and legal proceedings in the cases are still pending. Typically, an applicant converts to Christianity after receiving a negative asylum decision. Christianity may be a valid reason why an asylum seeker would be persecuted in their country of origin. – That's a pretty big amount. I don't know how much is yet to come (Anu Kauppi, Migri). (IL10.)

Addressing the conversion from a statistical or numeral perspective diminishes the agency of the converted asylum seeker and portrays an image of an “economic case”, not an individual actor with their own will. A common way of discussing asylum seekers is framing them through words that describe uncontrollable, anonymous movement. Asylum seekers are generally described as a one “mass” that increases or decreases. For example, portraying a group of asylum seekers attending to a church as a “bunch” (joukko, joukoittain) (LU5., SK3., HS5.) neglects the diversity of asylum seekers and portrays the group of asylum seekers as an unstoppable, expensive group of unrecognizable people.

5.2 Authority frame

Religious conversion is largely portrayed as a governmental, managerial challenge. The main question that most of the news articles try to answer is how to assess the credibility of a religious conversion via practical means, and also how to grasp on the judicial side of the conversion. In this struggle, the help of different experts is asked by interviewing people who are seen as being capable of making account of the conversions. Authority frame includes the overall portrayal of religious conversion as a phenomenon that can be addressed through certain professional practices that reveal the “truth”, inner conviction in this case. The core problem is thus the actual conversion, not necessarily the converted people as in asylum seekers. This frame shows the disagreements between different authorities most vividly. The main “conflict” is between two parties: the state and the church, and between Christian churches. All of them address the conversion as a somewhat governmental problem, but their knowledge, methods and objectives differ greatly.

When an applicant who has received a negative asylum decision appeals against his or her decision, the appeal is very often based on conversion to Christianity. This can be seen from the recent statistics by the Finnish Immigration Service. “It has clearly become a phenomenon”, says Esko Repo, Director of the Finnish Immigration Service’s Asylum Unit. According to him, the agency now has a special person who focuses on religious converts and coordinating their issues. (HS6.)

The example above is a typical way of describing the core problem and the treatment solution to it. At first, the problem is defined by referring to scientific reasoning (ontological authority), to a report published by Finnish Immigration Service in this case: asylum seekers convert to Christianity after a negative asylum decision. Second, the bureau, Finnish Immigration Service legitimizes it and admits that it is a true phenomenon. The bureau also considers it as something that needs more specific knowledge in order to be under control. Thus, “the religious converts” refer to a group of people that are yet not in the sphere of governance and hereby require specialized expertise. In this case, the solution is personnel management: the Finnish Immigration Service hires an expert that has the possibility to focus only on religious conversion.

The authority frame calls to pay attention to the overall interviewed experts in the news articles. Table 3. demonstrates the occurrence of interviewed experts. The categorization is based on whether the interviewee represents Finnish authorities, Evangelical Lutheran Church or other Christian institution, a political party, asylum seekers themselves or other. Due to the time span of the study, 2015–2019, some personnel have changed especially in the Finnish Immigration Service, and I did not personalize

all of the experts but drew attention to the status and the official title. However, some individual experts played more prominent role in the articles. News articles included altogether 105 different interviews. The field of expertise in the chosen articles is divided into two major groups based on field of profession, the most important being church officials and second being the Finnish Immigration Service officials.

Table 3. Actors presented as experts in the news articles

Experts	N
Finnish Immigration Service authorities	25
Priests and other church officials	47
Asylum seekers	17
Politicians	11
Other	15
Altogether	105

Church officials play a significant role in creating the overall depiction of the governmental conversion. The group of “priests and other church officials” is however diverse. Church officials have been interviewed widely from different Evangelical Lutheran congregations but also from Charismatic churches. The group includes priests, pastors, vicars, archbishops, bishops, deacons and volunteers that have been described to represent church. There are also certain individual church officials who have been repeatedly asked to give an overview on the situation. For example, Kaisa Huhtala, the vicar of Church of Teljä in Pori, has been interviewed in several news articles (YLE10., YLE14., IL2.) – more often than for example archbishop or bishops in total. Marja-Liisa Laihiala, who has worked as a specialist in issues regarding asylum and immigration in the Central administration of the Evangelical Lutheran Church (Kirkkohallitus), has also been interviewed several times (HS5., YLE1., YLE8., YLE13.). Esko Matikainen, the Head of Finland’s Pentecostal Church has most often commented issues regarding Pentecostal churches.

The role of the Finnish Immigration Service officials is also notable when the focus of the news article is on the credibility assessment in the refugee status determination. Especially Esko Repo, the Head of the Asylum Unit, who has been interviewed the most, has given several interviews regarding both the overall phenomenon but also immigration administration practices. Other important immigration

authorities are the Head of the Result Division Unit and the religion specialist of the Finnish Immigration Service. They have given statements for example about the policy changes that have happened concerning deportations, country of origin information, appeal policies and claims that asylum decisions are based on. They are interviewed about highly procedural matters.

As the expert field is so divided, there does not seem to be a need for certain groups of traditionally acknowledged experts. As I have mentioned earlier, medical experts have usually played an important role in other credibility assessment procedures, for example age assessment. The group of “others” is diverse. It includes for example an imam, different administrative authorities, lawyers and even a real estate manager of the swimming hall in Oulu where a group of asylum seekers were baptized (YLE2.).

Religious conversion amongst asylum seekers is pictured as a governmental challenge for all of the people who have to somehow face it: mostly the Finnish Immigration Service officials and Finland’s Christian church leaders. The authority frame comes visible in the ways how both immigration service officials and religious leaders and representatives try “solve” the deep-seated challenge of credibility assessment that is portrayed of being inevitable present when asylum seekers convert to Christianity. I found two themes where the main authorities contest on the real nature of Christian conviction and the assessment of it.

5.2.1 State vs. religion

The state vs. religion frame portrays the mediatized disagreements between Finnish Immigration Service officials and church representatives, who do not share the idea of what are the best possible methods on how to assess inner conviction. Immigration officials stress that their knowledge is based on their own professionalism in the credibility assessment. Religious leaders state the same – they also emphasize that they have the best professional experience to assess Christian conviction. However, their conceptions on what “professionalism” is, is based on different premises.

Religious leaders and church representatives highlight their knowledge on two main grounds: personal and educational knowledge. Their personal knowledge constructs of personal experiences with asylum seekers: spending time with them and noticing changes in their behaviour. Priests and other church officials also emphasize the length of the time that they have been spending with asylum seekers. They state that the short-lasting hearing in refugee status determination cannot be considered equally trustful compared to months or years that the Christian church members spend with asylum

seekers. For example, Mari-Anni Auvinen, The Secretary-General of Finnish Ecumenical Council, states that they (referring to Christian priests) have seen the life change and the process which makes congregations superior to officials (HS3).

Auvinen says that although it is impossible to thoroughly assess the authenticity of the faith, the congregations have a considerable advantage over it compared to officials. "We know these people and we have seen the life change and the long process right next to them", she (Auvinen, Secretary General of Finnish Ecumenical Council) says. (HS3.)

Church representatives emphasize that priests have the best knowledge of what education is needed in order to assure one's Christianity. They make references to different courses, confirmation schools and camps and discussions with priests that are seen as trustful and proper methods for learning Christianity. Churches have made certain educational curricula for asylum seekers who want to convert to Christianity; for example, most of the Evangelical Lutheran churches require active attendance for congregation's events for at least three months, participation to a confirmation school and passing the final test. These requirements are constantly underlined in the quotations by Christian representatives. They highlight also the procedural nature of assessing conversion; in order to assess one's Christian conviction, the convert needs to follow certain administrative steps to be assured that they have gathered enough correct knowledge about Christianity.

Nearly ten young Afghans have joined the Imatra congregation in a few months. Membership requires a successful confirmation school and a close contact with the congregation for three months. It is about a big change of values and beliefs. "They need to understand what they are doing, to not get baptized from social pressure or because of the asylum process", continues Julin (priest). (YLE6.)

"We have a rule in the Lutheran Church that you must be active in the church for at least three months. And during that time there is also a confirmation school", says Pastor Jonathan Westergård of the Turku Michael Parish. (YLE8.)

Many priests, who have given statements about credibility assessment, refer to the numbers of the asylum seekers who they have met, discussed with and taught Christianity. For example, Petri Harjula, the leading pastor of Pori's Pentecostal church, stated that he has sent tens of testimonials which implicates the increase of his professionalism in noticing possible fraud in conversions. Similar statistical statements have been made by other priests – it appears to be a common way of highlighting the accumulation of experience and thus professionalism. Especially the number of the people who

the priests have baptized is emphasized and used as a ground for constructing knowledge on assessing one's conviction.

“I have sent a dozen testimonials of the baptized that I know. It is difficult to go inside other's mind, but I do have noticed the authenticity of these people's faith”, says the leader of the Pentecostal Church of Pori, Pastor Petri Harjula. (YLE3.)

Kaisa Huhtala questions the ability of the Finnish Immigration Service in assessing the convictions of asylum seekers only on the basis of hearings held with them. The pastor says she has confirmed more than 1100 people during her career, and she sees that she hasn't converted anyone systematically. “Now, for the first time I have had to see that my expertise is under suspicion and my word is not trusted. This upsets me”, Huhtala writes. (YLE10.)

The Finnish Immigration Service officials also refer to factual statistics of the number of converted asylum seekers, but from a different perspective. For example, the policy change regarding legal aid for asylum seekers caused discussion about the refugee status determination whether asylum seekers are able to mention all the necessary information, as they do not have legal assistant at the hearing unless considered necessary. Esko Repo, the Director of the Asylum Unit, stated that there is no scientific proof that would support the assumption that the legal reform would affect the quality of the hearing procedure. He also stated that the increased number of converted asylum seekers cannot be explained on this premise. Repo thus refers to scientific evidence that does not explain the conversion and assumes that there must be some other reasons that affect the increase in conversions.

According to Repo, the change has not meant that more decisions of Finnish Immigration Service would be overturned. “There is no researched information about it. The legal aid reform did not affect the interview in any way. This change has not had any effect on our procedures.” (Esko Repo) (LU1.)

The Finnish Immigration Service officials trust in the procedural, judicial nature of assessing conversion. They often refer to precedents by Supreme Administrative Court and underline the importance of case law. They also make constant references to Finnish Alien Law and the principles on how asylum is granted overall and what is the role of the risk of religious persecution in it. By referring to hearings, asylum procedures and legislation, they also emphasize their capability and capacity to implement asylum policies. By basing their argumentation on legal matters, officials detach themselves from the moral accusations that they face from Christian representatives about not acknowledging the expertise of Christian priests in assessments. Immigration officials do admit the challenges that are present when assessing one's religious conviction, but they also simplify the

question by underlining the legal and administrative way of solving the asylum applications. As the example below shows, immigration official takes a straightforward, goal-oriented perspective for the issue: the official presents the legal background, emphasizes the need of assessing whether the asylum seeker is *truly* converted and the possibilities of religious persecution in their country of origin.

Forssell (Migri) says that converting to Christianity can affect whether asylum is granted or not. “Of course, it has an effect. The ground for persecution under the Aliens Law is religion. It is important for us to find out that if the applicant has genuinely converted to Christianity, then what will happen to him when he returns to his country of origin.” (YLE7.)

The Finnish Immigration Service officials make also references to the knowledge that they produce by themselves, such as country information reports and recruitment of officials with specialized information on religion. Officials emphasize that they have the most accurate knowledge of the situations in the country of origins due to their own country reports. This kind of self-supporting knowledge is also emphasized by politicians; they trust that the Finnish Immigration Service has the best possible knowledge of the situation in the countries where asylum seekers have left. References for international cooperation are also made regarding country information reports. Finland does not construct the knowledge of the situations in the countries of origins by itself but leans on European cooperation, as Matti Vanhanen, the Chairman of the Committee on Foreign Affairs, states (MT4.). This legitimizes the credibility assessment from the perspective whether the threat for the persecution is real or not.

Finnish Immigration Service cannot comment on an individual asylum application or decision. However, at the general level, Mikko Nyman, Team Manager of the Country Information Service, says that the agency monitors the development of the situation of Christians in Iran from several different sources. (IL9.)

Halonen also stated that the officials should visit the conflict countries to get familiar with the conditions in the countries and the receiving officials, and thus update Finland's information on the situation in the countries. Vanhanen considers this a natural requirement. “We have to monitor what is happening, but Finland alone does not make this assessment, but strives for European cooperation”, says Vanhanen. (MT4.)

As the example above (MT4.) shows, Vanhanen also refers to a broader group, “European cooperation”, to underline his argument. In their argumentation, both of the parties, the state and the church, lean on wider, epistemic communities to support their viewpoints. Finnish Immigration Service emphasizes especially international governmental organisations, such as The UN Refugee Agency (UNHCR) and also “Nordic colleagues” as in other immigration service officials in other

Nordic countries. Especially the UNHCR guidance on credibility assessment methods is often referred, as well as “the situation” in other European countries. Finnish Immigration Service officials refer to other Nordic countries especially when highlighting the particularly big number of converted asylum seekers to underline the “phenomenal” nature of the conversions.

“We have reviewed Finland's figures with our Nordic colleagues this spring. There is no such strong phenomenon out there”, Repo says. (KAL1.)

“Unlike other Nordic and European countries, we in Finland have a significant phenomenon that Afghans and Iraqis convert to Christianity at the appeal stage”, Forssell describes. (AL1.)

Christian churches do similar references to bigger epistemic communities that are however located in Finland – no references to international colleagues in other European churches was done. For example, Finnish Ecumenical Council is seen as a credible actor that is consulted when dealing issues such as different practices regarding baptism. Ecumenical council is portrayed as a “mother figure” that can somehow give the final, most correct statement to the complex religious questions and tame especially the “wild” Charismatic churches and their more flexible baptism practices. Ecumenical council and especially its Secretary-General, Mari-Anna Auvinen is often interviewed about issues regarding different administrative practices that different Christian churches use when attaching new converts into their congregations. The council gave instructions about for example the proper number of classes that one should take before considering baptism.

Due to wild practices, the Finnish Ecumenical Council, which also includes the Pentecostal Church, gave instructions at the beginning of last year to how join a congregation. According to it, teaching regarding baptism must be given from 20 hours to one year. “It is not the basic nature of Christianity to reject anyone or doubt another's beliefs”, Council Secretary General Mari-Anna Auvinen emphasizes. “However, it is still the responsibility of the priests to determine whether a person's search for faith is genuine or whether the motives are elsewhere.” (HS5.)

Christian representatives also make references to a wider, shared joint statement that was published in 2017. Four hundred Finnish priests from different Christian movements wrote an appeal for convincing the Ministry of the Interior that Finnish Immigration Service should consult more clergymen, priests and other experts with experience of religions when assessing the credibility of a religious conversion in the refugee status determination. The appeal emphasized the complexity of assessing inner conviction from the perspective of religious leaders. It also stated that the Finnish

Immigration Service has no right to evaluate the credibility of the religious conversion as one's inner conviction is something that one is not able to measure.

“The incentive for the statement has been the forced returns that have recently been imposed on people that are known to have converted from Islam to Christianity”, says Mari-Anna Auvinen, Secretary General of Finnish Ecumenical Council. “We have been cooperating with Finnish Immigration Service for three years, but now it was time for a statement.” (HS3.)

The credibility assessment as a governmental challenge challenges also the public credibility of the state and the church. For example, Mika Koskinen, the Editor-in-Chief of *Ilta-Sanomat*, has written that the credibility of Finnish asylum policy is under threat if the administrative practices regarding noticing bogus conversions cannot be assured (IL6.). Also, the Evangelical Lutheran Church is seemingly worried about its public image. Marja-Liisa Laihia, the immigration work official at the Central administration of the Evangelical Lutheran Church, has stated that especially the role of unclear baptism practices harms the credibility of the church in the eyes of Finnish Immigration Service (YLE2.). The comment implicates that the church wants to be seen as a credible actor in participating the administrative process of finding out the truth of religious conversion. Both of the institutions are contested as administrative actors whether their practices are sufficient and efficient enough.

Uncritical belief in the stories of asylum seekers, combined with a low threshold of evidence and transferring the evidence duty to the authorities, undermines the credibility of Finnish asylum policy. (IL6.)

“When churches have negotiated with the immigration service, it has appeared that unclear baptisms have complicated the assessment practices of immigration service. This has come clear when they have interviewed people who have converted to Christianity. Frankly speaking, it complicates the credibility of the church, if there are actors that do not act respectfully”, Laihia continues. (YLE2.)

Immigration service officials are generally portrayed as a trustful source of information. They are given lot of space for interviewing but also the portrayal of the interviews is somewhat respectful. In many news articles, they are allowed to give the “final” solution, treatment recommendation or explanation for the difficulties that take place when making sense of the overall phenomenon and assessing asylum seeker's inner conviction. As the example below shows, Esko Repo's explanation for the situation is not questioned but more of taken as granted. Also, the politicians interviewed or

quoted have emphasized their trust towards immigration service officials and their professionalism when it comes to refugee status determination.

Repo (Migri) considers one explanation being the misinformation circulating amongst asylum seekers that simply by converting to Christianity would be enough to get granted an asylum. Other possible explanations are an example from other applicants and the public debate. (MT2.)

However, the church representatives' attitudes towards Finnish Immigration Service are less trustful and more disparaging. This disparaging attitude is also highly underlined in the news reporting. For example, Vicar Kaisa Huhtala, has been described of being "outraged" when Finnish Immigration Service denied her testimonial on one asylum seekers Christianity (YLE10.). Similarly, the deportation of Sardar "shook" the whole Christian church community in Kemijärvi and caused "deep worry" amongst the people who knew him (HS2.). These kinds of strong, emotional attributes that depict reactions of church representatives construct an image of a more emphatic actor than for example the explanatory, rational immigration service.

Even though the main epistemic dispute was portrayed to be between Finland and Christian churches based in Finland, some news articles also stated that no state nor religion as an institution can truly have the access to one's religious conviction. Religious conviction is under no authority to be figured out. For example, Kaarina Heiskanen, who wrote an opinion text for Satakunnan Kansa (SK2.) emphasized that even Finnish people who are "proper Christians" ("riipitetty ja rokotettu") would not manage to pass the hearing that asylum seekers need to go through. Another opinion text by Minna Kettunen in Maaseudun Tulevaisuus (MT3.) had an emphasis on the overall mystified nature of Christianity. She stated that one cannot know what the core message of Christianity truly is – whether it is the "following" of Jesus, societal consequences such as democracy and human rights or personal hope and forces that one can get from religions in general. This is why, according to Kettunen, the question of "why" asylum seekers convert to Christianity is overall irrelevant.

5.2.2 Lutheranism vs. Charismatic movement

The two main ontological authorities, the state and the church, are portrayed of being contrary in terms of their views on asylum seekers' religious conversion. Similarly, the debate also takes place between Christian churches as they do not share the same understanding on some core questions on how to define Christian conviction in principle, and how to approach converted asylum seekers and

assess their convictions. The Lutheranism vs. Charismatic movement frame represents the contest between different Christian churches that try to raise their own voices regarding religious conviction and the assessment of it. Within this process, the news articles depict the churches in different ways; if state representatives are portrayed in general as objective and explanatory, more emotional attributes are connected to Christian leaders and church members. When scrutinized further, Evangelical Lutheran Church is depicted as a more credible actor whereas Charismatic churches are somehow suspicious and not as trustworthy due to their more flexible practices regarding welcoming and registering new members.

Asylum seekers did not join only Evangelical Lutheran churches but participated widely for example in Pentecostal churches' activities and joined smaller, new Charismatic churches where the religious doctrines and biblical interpretations can differ quite a lot from the Lutheran tradition. Different public attitudes towards a "Charismatic conversion" and a "Lutheran conversion" can be seen from the news articles as Lutheran conversion is depicted more as a familiar, secure way of converting, whereas conversion to a Charismatic movement is framed more untrustworthy or at least somewhat shady. Controversial attributes such as "wild" and "fast track baptism" (pikakaste) are connected only to the Charismatic congregations, whereas Lutheran churches and their activities are discussed in more trustful way. The example below depicts the journalist's detective-like attitude towards one Charismatic congregation; the journalist wanted to know what is *really* going on inside the congregation. The angle portrays Charismatic movement including mysterious, even cult-like communities that hide something behind the scenes. Similar doubtful portrayals were not used when framing the Lutheran churches work with asylum seekers.

For this feature story, we unfolded what's going on behind the scenes of the conversions. [...] There has been active conversion work on behalf of the Charismatic congregations, which has not always been done with open doors. Turned out that in both the new Charismatic movements and Pentecostal churches, fast track baptisms were given with little or no religious teaching at all.
[...]
"They have thought they've been baptized into an Evangelical Lutheran church, but it's been something else." (Marja-Liisa Laihia, Central administration of the Evangelical Lutheran Church) (HS5.)

Some of the Lutheran priests' attitudes towards fellow priests in Charismatic churches follow the somewhat cautious attitude. For example, Vicar Jouni Lehtikainen, highlights that at least in "their" (referring to a certain Turku's Evangelical Lutheran congregation) congregation asylum seekers are not attracted to join the church by promising positive asylum decisions – which is, according to

Lehikoinen, not the case in Charismatic churches. He states that he has met pastors from the Charismatic churches who have misused their position. This example is a depiction on how professionalism of Charismatic priests is diminished by Lutheran priests, and questions of what is trustful, righteous Christianity take place also in the discussions of who is seen as a trustworthy priest, and who not.

Pastor Jouni Lehikoinen of the Michael Parish assures that at least in the Michael Parish, asylum seekers are not attracted to the Lutheran Church by promising positive decisions. “It is not beneficial for the church, nor for anyone, to take advantage of the conversion. Instead, I have met Charismatic pastors who have misused their positions”, he says. (YLE8.)

Journalists distinguish different Christian churches by referring to broader religious epistemic communities. Often, when the focus in the news article is on Pentecostal congregations and their “behaviour” regarding asylum seekers, references are made to Finnish Pentecostal Church, the umbrella organization for most of the Finland’s local Pentecostal congregations. Esko Matikainen, the Head of Finnish Pentecostal Church, is repeatedly interviewed after the news article has introduced problems regarding small Pentecostal congregations. Some of them have been blamed for giving baptism too easily and based on wrong motives, and Matikainen is portrayed as a religious leader who “herds” the smaller Pentecostal congregations in order to get structured practices for encountering asylum seekers. He is somehow responsible for the behaviour of “untamed”, local Pentecostal congregations.

“The Pentecostal Church has now tightened its control. In addition to the council's (FEC) instructions, it has made its own, more detailed instructions, which have been sent to all the Pentecostal churches”, Matikainen says. (HS5.)

This way of “herding” smaller congregations is generally often present when news articles deal with some sort of suspicious activities that has taken place in any of the Christian churches. Smaller, local congregations are depicted as needing for some sort of a central governmental guidance in order to act responsible with asylum seekers. This kind of bureaucratic approach to govern local congregations constructs an image of a church as a shepherd that has the knowledge of what kind of Christianity is right and correct. Thus, the central government of a church is also represented of having the best knowledge on how non-Christian asylum seekers should be encountered to make sure that they get the proper religious education before converting to Christianity. The worry that rises from the central governance representatives from both Charismatic churches (for example Matikainen) and

Evangelical Lutheran Church (for example Laihia) is shared regardless the otherwise different interpretations on Christian doctrines. However, Laihia also suggests that local Lutheran congregations could approach local non-Lutheran congregations in order to open up discussions about the responsibility that is present when dealing with asylum seekers.

“Local congregations from different denominations could approach independent congregations. This could be a start for a discussion of what would be responsible and what might result from baptism or poor teaching for asylum seekers. Cooperation could be built between different congregations”, Laihia continues. (YLE2.)

Especially baptism practices cause discussion amongst different Christian congregations in the news articles. Baptism is widely shared as a significant Christian ritual, but the concrete ways on how to conduct baptism and on what biblical premises are contested. Laihia, who represents the Evangelical Lutheran Church, states that baptism is about both joining the community of faith but also the Christian congregation. Ruonala, the pastor of Lähetyksseurakunta (Charismatic) congregation, argues vice versa – he does not want to give anyone else but the baptized persons themselves the voice to define baptism. Ruonala’s conception of baptism is more interpretative and overall more adaptable. He emphasized that the widespread media attention about the immersion baptisms that have taken place in the public swimming hall surprised him, and that people should not make such a big deal about the whole phenomenon.

“Baptism means participating to the Christian faith and joining the congregation. A person should inevitably understand what is the community that baptizes whether it is actually a congregation at all”, Laihia states.

[...]

According to Jari Ruonala, the most important thing about baptism is that the baptized person themselves understands what it is about. However, in the context of Lähetyksseurakunta congregation of Oulu, the baptism itself does not affiliate a person to the congregation. (YLE2.)

Not only the Lutheran and Charismatic traditions contest with each other about their credibility as shepherds of asylum seekers and their Christian conviction, but they also need to contest with Finnish Immigration Service. In the news article, where Finnish Immigration Service was interviewed about the different churches and their movements, Anu Karppi emphasized that the different practices that Christian congregations have, do not have effect on the credibility assessment. However, she also said that the general circumstances that have affected asylum seeker’s decision need to be assessed carefully in order to assess credibility. Karppi states that Finnish Immigration Service does not *in principle* value different churches, but they do look the overall experience on baptism, for example.

As noted earlier, Charismatic churches are widely not seen as credible church in terms of baptism practices. By highlighting “what has happened before and after baptism” can be seen as a reference to some congregations that do not act according to a certain, respected Christian baptism doctrine.

Does the person who baptized the asylum seeker, or how quickly he or she has been baptized, affect the assessment of motives? “The decisions cannot be affected by the congregation or how fast the baptism has happened because we do not, in principle, give different values to the practices of different congregations in terms of reliability. However, we take into account the circumstances in which the applicant has ended up changing religion and assess whether they support credibility. What is essential is the applicant's personal experience and account of what has happened during baptism and before and after baptism and how faith has affected him or her”, says Karppi. (HS4.)

5.3 Morality frame

The last frame stemming from the news articles is related to values and moral. Even though conversion is mainly portrayed as a threat that appears as insincerity or as an economic burden or as a broader question of authority, values play an important role in the discussion as well and are addressed especially when justifying certain policies. Questions such as “What kind values Finland has as a society” and “What is good and valuable when it comes to facing asylum seekers and their needs” are asked in the data. Two themes related to morality rose from the data.

5.3.1 Helping the victims

The religious leaders and church representatives picture asylum seekers as a group of people who require special protection and care due to a threat that they might face based on their new religious conviction. The question whether a person is entitled to international protection or not is a question of helping a marginal group of people in the society, and thus connected to values such as equality and solidarity. In this case, the values are intertwined into one key word: victimhood. The victim frame comes most visible when news articles discuss deportations and possible persecution, and it is highly connected to broader questions of who is entitled for help and who is not. Asylum seekers are seen as victims because of their conversion that might cause severe, or even fatal persecution if they are deported back to their countries of origins. Churches, however, see asylum seekers more of a group of people who they can target their core moral principle: helping those in need. Thus, the victimhood theme is especially prevalent in the quotations of church representatives.

Lehikoinen sees that the reason why asylum seekers convert to Christianity is the result of the Church's charity work. "The charity work has led many people with a Muslim background to start asking what is this Christian entity that is helping us and why they are helping us." (Lehikoinen) (YLE7.)

The victim frame is prevalent in many published opinions that support asylum seekers against deportations and thus possible persecution. For example, Airi Airola (HS9.), a retired religion teacher from Pori, supports the former President Tarja Halonen's view regarding deportations by highlighting the life threat via victimhood perspective. Airola refers to her own understanding of the possible persecution that could happen for deported converted asylum seekers. She states that their situation is desperate and calls Finland to take care of the possible victims of persecution. Finnishness is being addressed from the moral perspective; Airola states that helping those in need is substantially a part of being a Finn.

My own perception is that if Muslim refugees who have converted to Christianity in Europe are forcefully returned, they will be in danger many times over – and they know it well. It tells something about their desperate situation that they are willing to take that risk. [...] Finnishness also includes taking care of those who need help without fussing. (HS9.)

Another opinion text published in Länsi-Suomi (LS2.) was written from the perspective of an imagined asylum seeker and his struggles in the asylum procedure, and the overall tone was highly morally victimizing. The opinion text emphasized the role of God, Jesus and Christianity that "rescue" the asylum seeker who needs to be rescued from their own culture. Asylum seeker is portrayed as someone who needs overall protection against immigration authorities, because they might not be able to know the subtle distinctions that different Christian conventions have – or even be capable for conceptual thinking at all.

No one can define God. What we are talking about is our own image of God. It is influenced by our own life experiences, the community in which we have lived as Christians, the use of language that we have heard. To which convention does Migri rely on: the Lutheran, the Revivalist, the Charismatic movement tradition? What if the person being interviewed does not stay at the convention? Or if they are incapable of conceptual thinking and unable to verbalize his knowledge and experiences? For converts to Christianity, God is kind. He finds people himself and guides them on the right path. Christianity is the way, and they are only at the beginning. (LS2.)

As the example above also shows, newly converted asylum seekers are often portrayed as somehow naïve (for example YLE8., YLE9.), and this is seen as a risk for them getting international protection

– which they are morally entitled to. Their knowledge about Christianity is little and they need special attention and guidance due to the possible misunderstandings that stems from their fragility. The church employees working with asylum seekers thus require specific oral and written instructions so that they know how to communicate with asylum seekers and support them with best possible ways. This comes visible for example in the discussions around legislative reforms that were made on the restrictions of the asylum seekers right to legal aid. As the director of Imatra's reception centre Lauri Perälä states, asylum seekers do not necessarily know what relevant information for the asylum application is, and what not, which portrays an asylum seeker as a victim of the asylum procedures.

“Now that legal aid is no longer available for an asylum interview, clients may not be able to tell all the facts relevant to the application, and then they only become apparent at the appeal stage when legal aid is available. In this case, the administrative court returns the cases back to Migri's handling”, Perälä says. (LU1.)

Victim frame appears also when the news articles portray the relationship between asylum seekers themselves. For instance, the news article that introduced religious conversions that had taken place in a reception centre in Kotka, the emphasis was in the conflict that has happened between the new converted Christians and Muslims. A director of the reception centre commented the issue stating that religious conversion is one of the biggest reasons for disputes happening in reception centres. This kind of framing includes the earlier presented threat frame where notions on fear and unsafeness are attached to the discussion, but more importantly the news article portrays an image of a somehow essentially victimized group of people.

“We had one case, surprisingly the only one so far. The roommates did not accept the conversion, and there were various accusations”, says Hannu Leino, the director of the reception center. “This was solved by relocating the convert away from Kotka and calming down the situation. There are fears that there will be more.” (YLE12.)

One way of addressing the victim frame is by looking at the quotations by converted asylum seekers themselves. They were mostly quoted in matters related to their own feelings; either by showing their sorrow and pain that is related to the possible deportation, or by thanking the supporting persons and institutions, such as churches or Christian belief. One example of this victim frame is a news article that tells the story of three former Muslims (YLE9.). The title of the news article is “Three Muslims who stopped believing”, and it tells three different personal and emotional conversion stories. At first, the three asylum seekers tell their personal stories from their perspective and after their stories, a Finnish imam explains what the phenomenon really is. The conversion stories were thus an emotional

introduction to the core questions of what religious conversion from Islam to Christianity is, and what are the reasons behind it in the context of asylum seeking. Eventually, the imam was the expert, not the asylum seekers, even though the asylum seekers told their personal experiences in public. Asylum seekers are represented as victimized “experience experts” more than ontological authorities that the reader could actually trust. The imam is portrayed having specialized knowledge of Islam as a religion; he also underestimated the experiences and statements of the three former Muslims who don’t. The imam stated that the asylum seekers do not have enough knowledge of the history of Christianity and Islam and of being Muslim which makes their conversion suspicious.

Hundreds of asylum seekers have renounced Islam and joined a [Christian] church. Three former Muslims told Yle why they did so.

[...]

The speeches of the converts make the Finnish imam Anas Hajjar wonder how much the persons have actually known about Islam. “Arguments represent typical stereotypical speeches. They clearly represent the speaker’s limited knowledge of history, Christianity, the obligation of Christianity, Islam and its obligations, and being a Muslim”, Hajjar says. (YLE9.)

The hearings that asylum seekers need to “pass” in order to get granted an asylum often highlight the victim frame if discussed from the perspective of Christian churches. The hearings are portrayed as long, challenging and exhausting procedures that even Finnish people wouldn’t “survive” or get through due to the numerous nearly impossible questions. Highlighting the stressful hearing portrays asylum seekers as victims for immigration service; they are required to prove their true conviction more than Finnish Christians, and thus they suffer even more from the asylum procedures.

The hearings of Finnish Immigration Service are thorough. There are dozens of questions about religion. Italehti got access to the secret interview records. It has not previously been reported in public how Migri measures asylum seekers' accounts of religious convictions. (IL3.)

“Churches are concerned that some of the Finnish Immigration Service's officials have very fragile religious and cultural skills when assessing the credibility of someone's faith”, Auvinen says. "Christian converts have often had to go through a lengthy process and several Church screenings, but when they go to Migri's interview, they might say that their conviction is not genuine.” (HS3.)

Some of the news articles attach heroic features and attributes to the victimhood. An example of this “heroic victim” depiction is the news articles about Sardar, the asylum seeker who converted to Christianity in Kemijärvi, but eventually got deported after his negative asylum decision. The news reporting of his case is mostly based on the sadness that his deportation causes in the congregation

community. He is portrayed as a survivor, as a noble and a hard-working person emphasizing his close connection to the religious community. In a way, he is valued as a “good” and welcomed asylum seeker: he has integrated into a Finnish community, he has been working hard to know the language and he has a job. Overall, he has done everything exactly that is good and valuable which stresses his victimhood even more. As his deportation was a shock to the community, it also shows what kind of asylum seekers are welcomed and what features are most appreciated. For example, studying Finnish language, going to a Christian confirmation school and getting lots of friend from the congregation are considered as a “great start” for integration and thus underline the unfair proceeding that Finnish Immigration Service ended up doing when not granting him asylum.

Sardar’s early steps in Finland went well. He was transferred immediately from Tornio to Kemijärvi in November 2015, where he began studying Finnish at the reception center. After that, he attended confirmation school, made a lot of friends from the congregation, and learned more about the Bible. “I have three godparents there and a godfather who is a priest”, Sardar says. The Finnish Immigration Service made a negative decision on the asylum sought by Sardar already in autumn 2017. (IL9.)

Values that the Christian churches have are also being used as an argument why the congregations have eventually ended up helping the “victim” asylum seekers. The idea of helping those in need arises from the data as a basic moral principle that the churches share, and also as a reason why asylum seekers have gotten interested in their activities. Christian churches claim that they have not intentionally or actively been trying to “convert” asylum seekers, but more of implemented the idea of helping, which has eventually led also to religious conversions. The charity activities are so inherent in the agency of the churches that they had no other choice than to help the victims.

Laajasalo, the bishop of Helsinki, reminds that the church’s charity activities have not been aimed at baptisms, but have been aimed at helping those in need. – Of course, it may be that people who have received help in times of need have also experienced a genuine interest in what kind of people and what kind of community is that wants to help them”, says Laajasalo. (IL2.)

5.3.2 Religious freedom as a human right

Raising the religious freedom as a human right as its own theme is based on the constant occurrence of the human rights and their role in asylum procedure in the news articles and especially in the interviews. Human right frame becomes most visible when the discussion is around persecution,

international protection and Finland's role as a part of international community. If the victimhood frame is more prevalent in the quotations by church members, the human right perspective is highlighted mostly by politicians and other people who have contributed to the news articles. For example, Päivi Räsänen (The Christian Democrats), has constantly underlined the need to protect human rights and give asylum seekers the possibility to change their religion. Similarly, Maria Ohisalo (The Green League) argued that due to different international agreements, it is a basic right to be able to seek for an asylum.

Räsänen sees that asylum seekers who have converted to Christianity must, however, be guaranteed the right to change their religion and be allowed to stay in Finland in accordance with human rights. (IL4.)

“People have had to prove, witness and prove in different ways how a person is entitled to asylum. According to various international agreements, there is a fundamental right to seek asylum”, Ohisalo stated. (IL1.)

Even though researchers played a very little role in the overall discussion around converted asylum seekers and refugee status determination, two researchers, Talvikki Ahonen and Ulla Siirto, wrote an opinion text that supported asylum seekers especially from the perspective of religious freedom and human rights. They emphasized that Finnish Immigration Service should be interested in the possible persecution and the human rights risks that converted asylum seekers would face – not measuring inner conviction or defining the correct religiosity. According to Ahonen and Siirto, human rights are by far the most important thing in the asylum procedures.

Freedom of religion and conscience that is in the international human rights treaties and the Finnish Constitution, includes the right to confess and practice a religion, the right to express one's convictions and the right to belong or not to belong to a religious community. (TS2.)

Human rights are also connected to broader epistemic communities, such as non-governmental human rights organizations. Human rights organizations are portrayed of trustful sources especially when mapping persecution in the countries of origins where asylum seekers have left. This comes especially prevalent when the discussion is about Iran. However, human rights organizations are often discussed at a highly general level: the references are often made to a generic human rights organization or organizations without mentioning the actual name of the organization. Other references to non-governmental organizations are also made regarding human rights. For example, Finnish Immigration Service refers to UNICEF, a UN agency for children's rights, when arguing

reasons why children under 12 years old are being interviewed in the refugee status determination regarding family member's religious conversion.

According to human rights organizations, more than 90 Christians were arrested by Iranian authorities last year. Finnish Immigration Service notes that Protestant churches are not able to act openly in Iran, but home church activities in private spaces are extensive. (TS3.)

Religious freedom as a human right is used as a moral argument to define Finland and Finnishness. Finland is portrayed as a "good" country versus countries where religious freedom does not play the same role. Finland is seen as ethically righteous liberal nation-state, which is why Finland should pay special attention to protecting human rights. Similarly, Finnish Immigration Service is being "reminded" by for example church representatives that immigration service officials should not doubt one's basic rights under which changing religious conviction belongs. Finland is depicted as a superior country to the asylum seekers' countries of origins when it comes to certain values, such as religious freedom and basic human rights.

But Finnish society has the freedom of religion, and it also means that here a Christian can convert to a Muslim and a Muslim to a Christian without pressure or sanctions. (HS9.)

It is often thought that changing a religion is a trick that is being used to influence things. It is unfortunate that the fundamental human right is treated with such humility and skepticism, Laihia criticizes. (YLE13.)

6 Discussion

Media space is always limited and under constant competition. Different experts, politicians, scientists, lobbyists and common people want to be heard in complex societal issues that news try to cover. Eventually journalists make the final decision whether one is seen as a relevant interviewee and can have an important input regarding the topic. Obviously not only the chosen interviewees construct the image of who has the best knowledge of the situation as news articles are overall based on certain information from certain sources. Choosing the interviewee and offering them a space to tell their opinions is related to the some of the core questions of critical frame analysis: who defines the problem and how, and who does not. Thus, the expertise in this context did not refer to any objective “knowing” but more of exposing the broader ideas of who/what is seen an authority and has the best knowledge of the phenomenon by the public media. All of the interviewees make a definition of the situation as they are given media space to define the primary interpretation of what is happening. Eventually, they define the primary frame to make an account of the situation.

The aim of this study was to map the news media discussion around asylum seekers’ religious conversions in Finland and the construction of authority around the phenomenon. Three main frames could be found from the news articles: threatening conversion frame, authority frame and morality frame. Following the tradition of epistemic governance (Alasuutari & Qadir 2014; 2016) and Alasuutari’s (2018) further conceptualization of epistemic authority, the key findings regarding interviewed experts and the depicted ontological authority in general seem notable. The overall portrayal of the shared knowledge about the topic is based on factual seeming, widely shared idea of features that asylum seekers substantially have or the societal effects that they might cause; insincerity as a feature and economic burden as a consequence. Morality plays a role in the epistemic work too as values such as helping those in need (which also produces an image of a victim) and human rights are referred often especially by politicians and common people who have commented the phenomenon. The main ontological debate takes place between two main authoritative organizations: Finnish Immigration Service (state) and different Christian congregations (church). The state and the church, and also the Christian churches with each other, contest with the best possible practices on the identification of the authenticity of asylum seekers’ inner convictions.

However, it is not reasonable to argue that a person or an organization who a reporter has decided to interview has automatically somehow gained “authority”, but one can assess the interviewees more

from the perspective of who gets to speak on behalf of asylum seekers' inner conviction. As the key findings show, the two main institutions here are the state and the churches. The ontological authority of the Finnish Immigration Service representatives is mainly based on factual, administrative reasoning, such as judicial procedures and laws, country of origin information they produce themselves and references to international state-originated epistemic communities. Church representatives lean more on their personal contact with asylum seekers and the certain Christian rituals (confirmation school, baptism) that they use to make sure that conversion to Christianity happens on the right premises, in an orthodox way. Pyykkönen (2009, 30) describes the expertise of the church employees as both experience-driven expertise but also "expertise of the heart". As Alasuutari (2018) notes, the ontological and moral authority can sometimes be mixed up. He argues that "disputes about the actual, measurable effects of a law or the correct way to interpret sacred texts" (ibid., 178) might occasionally turn moral questions into a technical one and thus belonging to the ontological sphere of authority. In the news articles, the overall discussion is often lead to the technical measurement of religious conviction, which is why ontological and moral authority tend to also overlap. The priests and church officials represent the moral authorities by interpreting the proper way of "being" Christian based on sacred texts and meanwhile creating the measurable ways of assessing Christian belief.

Even though the news articles frame the authoritative controversy between the state and the church, the division can be regarded slightly obscure from the governmental perspective. As Pyykkönen (2009, 30) has noted, both of these institutions have actually the same goal: to find out the "true identification" of the asylum seeker. In Foucauldian terms, these *pastorates* that aim to secure the normality of population in Finland (the state) and provide sanctuary to the deported (the church), use similar practices. Pyykkönen (2009) calls attention to the biopolitical rationalities that merge these institutions. Both of them try to protect the community by using identification methods and encouraging the asylum seeker to tell the truth of themselves. The communities, however, are different: the state does not include asylum seekers under the territory of Finland, whereas the church sees them as members of the global, equal community for all. (ibid.) Even though the state officials, here being the Finnish Immigration Service officials, and the church officials differ on the "flock" where they want to guide asylum seekers, they still share the aim of exposing inner truth. Authority frame demonstrates this well – news articles construct symbolic borders for asylum seekers by highlighting the administrative need for identifying and controlling asylum seekers' conviction.

The three main frames of threatening conversion, authority contests and morality, reveal some ontological premises of the overall framing of the phenomenon. The three frames are supported by previous studies related to asylum seekers and religious conversion. The overall discussion had a persuasive layer of disputes, disagreements and difficulties. In a way, they depict the entire phenomenon as a one conflict that comes visible in various ways. As Fong and Ishak (2010) noticed when studying the news reporting around Lina Joy's religious conversion, religion in general is easily framed through "conflict" without actually opening up the context of the tension. Semetko and Valkenburg (2000) have noted that the conflict frame is overall one of the most common frames in news reporting and with it, media often tries to simplify complex public issues. The conflict frame refers to the dispute between individuals, groups or institutions and the target is to make audience interested. (ibid., 95.) This can also be seen from the data as different conflicts seem appear everywhere: they occur between asylum seekers and immigration officials, asylum seekers and the church but also between Muslim and Christian asylum seekers. Therefore, the imagery of conflict is somehow essentialized to the thorough understanding of the phenomenon.

This image of a conflict is also deeply seated in the structures of the news articles. In most of the articles where experts were interviewed, the structure supported the disputed relationship between interviewees. The church representatives and immigration service authorities were often framed as "counterforces". The conflictual nature of the articles can be also noticed on the news articles that take place in one news outlet. In other words, the news articles themselves constructed the conflict frame because they were published in the same journal. For example, *Iltalehti* published news articles that were seemingly opposing the religious conversion as an asylum claim and portrayed as a threat to Finland (IL6.). It also published news articles that were emotional and supportive to the deported converted asylum seeker (IL9.). Thus, conflict frame took place "inside" the news articles but also in between them. This is one way of catching the reader's interest.

Relating to the typical formation of news reporting, one notion about the data is that some of the articles are short and thus produce certain frames already by their structure. A common way of formatting a news article relating to asylum seekers' religious conversions is by first introducing the numeral or statistical scale, then locating it geographically and then presenting an institution under which the phenomenon "belongs", most often them being the Finnish Immigration Service and the Finnish Evangelical Lutheran Church. This kind of introduction makes the account of the phenomenon especially from the perspective of numbers, location and institution responsible. The phenomenon is presented from a seemingly scientific perspective, from the perspective that

emphasizes the role of quantitative reasoning. For example, the news from STT that many newspapers circulated, were short and based on this simplified structure. The structure itself leads the reader to look at the topic from a certain perspective: the numbers of converts, the churches they have converted to and the possible reasons related to asylum seeking process and the claims being used. Horsti (2005, 111) has noted that this is typical for short news stories; detailed information gives a reader a sign of “trust” as the information is based on “facts” and seems declarative. Pan and Kosci (1993) have also underlined the role of certain journalistic structures in frame-building as the structure itself can be the frame that leads the overall portrayal of the topic.

When conducting a media analysis of any kind, it is reasonable to also take a look to the things that are left out in the public discussion. The lack of science and scientific references is worth mentioning as research has not been given basically any voice in the news articles. For example, medical or psychological experts that could be considered of having scientific knowledge on credibility assessment practices in terms of lie detection are not mentioned or interviewed at all. All in all, only two researchers were interviewed: Tuomas Martikainen, the Head of the Migration Institute of Finland (Siirtolaisuusinstituutti) (TS1.) and researcher Jussi Sohlberg from the Church Research Center (Kirkon tutkimuskeskus) (HS5.). Science in itself shines in its absence in the news reporting: none of the interviewees mentions any scientific study for reference to their arguments except for one news article, where Finnish Immigration Service official Anu Karppi tells that some researchers have underlined the importance of listening to children, also younger than 12 years old, in the asylum hearings (IL10.). In the *Iltalehti* (IL4.) news article that deals with the written question by Päivi Räsänen. Räsänen states that according to studies, the Finnish Immigration Service has changed its policies regarding asylum decisions that are based on religious claims, but she does not refer to any specific study. When looking at Hartikainen’s similar research setting (2019) about the expertise in asylum appeals in religious media in Finland, it is notable that *Kirkko ja kaupunki* had decided to interview a Professor of Ecumenical Studies, Risto Saarinen, from University of Helsinki. Thus, religious media offered voice for an academic expert on Christianity whereas “secular” news articles barely notice the role of science.

It also seems notable that no references to certain legal matters were done in the news articles. For example, the Church Order (Kirkkojärjestys 8.11.1991/1055 v. 1993) that defines how one can become a member of the Evangelical Lutheran Church, was not mentioned even once. The interviewees often mention certain criterion that should be fulfilled before one can become a member of a Christian church which often do follow the Church Order’s methods (baptism, confirmation

school). However, no state representative or any priest from the Evangelical Lutheran Church mentions this which also raises the interest towards the law. Why is it not mentioned and what role does it actually play in the refugee status determination concerning Christian conviction? Vice versa, the Alien Law was referred rather often especially by the Finnish Immigration Service officials.

Another absence worth mentioning is the lack of portrayal of asylum seekers as active actors. The data confirms my pre-assumption about asylum seekers needing to justify their existence more (Horsti 2005, 278–279) as they are mostly portrayed as victims of asylum procedures and judicial practices. Asylum seekers could be regarded as experts, but their role of expertise is more controversial and interpretative. The use of the asylum seekers voice was mainly narrowed to expressions of gratitude or bringing up the fatal consequences of forced deportation, just like Horsti (2013) also noticed in the Finnish news reporting regarding sanctuary cases in 2007. Therefore, the journalistic motives for interviewing asylum seekers can be questioned. For example, the interviews can bring an emotional side for the story, which is especially prevalent in soft news (Reinemann et al. 2011).

The data revealed some imaginaries on conceptions of Finland, Finnishness and Finnish tradition of Christianity. Finland as a moral actor was prevalent in the news articles, and the human rights frame highlighted Finland as a righteous state that should support those in need while protecting law and order by noticing possible fraudulent ways of getting asylum. Following Malkki's (1995) conceptualization, asylum seekers were seen as confusing the national, Finnish order of things. "The pathologization of uprootedness in the national order of things" can take political, moral and medical forms (Malkki 1992, 32), and this pathologization comes visible especially in the threatening conversion frame: asylum seekers represent a substantially problematic group of people, and it is due to their lack of national roots. They do not simply fit inside the idea of a safe nation-state, and are discursively excluded outside the borders that "secure" Finland.

The data brings up the hundreds of years old discussion between the state and the church. Hartikainen (2019) noted that one element that is inevitably attached to the discussion of credibility assessment of asylum seekers' religious conversions is the eternal-seeming debate of the role of church in a society and its connection to state power. These institutions try to maintain their reputation by emphasizing their best knowledge on the issue which usually takes place by trying to affect the news coverage (Ihlen & Thorbjørnsrud 2013, 45–46). They also try to affect the overall public opinion by highlighting their views on current policies and policy-making processes. As Pyykkönen (2009, 25) noted already during the case of Naze Aghia in 2007, the Evangelical Lutheran Church and civic

organizations tried to “win” the media to their side for getting the needed publicity for the unwanted deportation decision. As Horsti (2013) has well defined, the discussion turns into a “bureaucratic fight” when different authorities and bureaucrats try to get acceptance for their idea of the best “religious conversion indicator”, in this case. In the end, the insoluble authority contest between the state and the church condenses into technical, administrative questions of assessing inner conviction of a marginalized group of people.

Even though the highest peak in the media attention around asylum seekers’ religious convictions has calmed down for now, there still remains many open questions for future research. As this study shows, the news reporting around questions relating to inner conviction offers space for only certain experts: mostly the state and the church officials. Further research could be conducted concerning other fields of experts, for example medical experts. How, if so, and where have the medical experts commented issues regarding credibility assessment of inner conviction, whether it is religious conviction or for example sexual orientation? Has there been any discussion about the credibility assessment practices in Finnish medical or psychiatric journals? If so, what is the depiction of an asylum seeker in that context?

As mentioned, asylum seekers did not convert to Christianity only in Finland but all-around Europe. Conducting an international comparison around news reporting of asylum seekers’ religious conversions in different European news outlets could offer a fruitful research setting for noticing some broader trends around news reporting concerning the topic. How have been converted asylum seekers portrayed in other Nordic countries? Is there any difference between Germany and Finland? What kind of frames can be found in the news reporting from France and who is regarded as an expert in Swiss media? Regardless of the overall dominant role of Christianity in Europe, all the countries have different Christian traditions and relationships between the state and the church which also makes the international comparison intriguing.

In the beginning of year 2020, Finland authorities repatriated two children from the Syrian al-Hol camp to Finland. The children were Finnish nationals and were separated from their mothers and brought back to Finland in order to protect them from the detention camp that was run by Islamic State (IS) in Syria. This operation was widely followed: the government organized press conferences, newspaper wrote numbers of articles about the situation in the camp, and for a while, it was one of the most significant news in Finland. Once the children had been repatriated, with almost a sensationalist media attention, the attention quietened down as fast as the children had arrived. One

could say that the children became a symbol of the Finnish rule of law. If Finland rescues the children, it stays as a trustful country and if not, it becomes something else.

When an issue becomes a media phenomenon, one can often hear someone asking “What are we actually discussing now that we are discussing this topic?” referring to values and norms underlying the media sensation. Similar question can be raised from the news reporting regarding asylum seekers who have converted to Christianity in Finland. Why are we discussing the converted asylum seekers, and who benefits it?

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Annex: Data

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- YLE3. Lore Korpelainen. Lähes sata turvapaikanhakijaa liittynyt Satakunnan helluntaiseurakuntiin – ”Kastetta ei saa helposti”. 23.10.2017.
- YLE4. Marjatta Rautio. Kristityiksi kääntyneet turvapaikanhakijat ja valitusruuhka romuttamassa pääministerin toiveet – käsittelyajat venyvät. 24.8.2017.
- YLE5. Salla Vuolteenaho. Kaleva: Migrille palautuvista turvapaikkapäätöksistä 70 prosentissa uusi peruste on kristinuskoon kääntyminen. 16.8.2017.
- YLE6. Jari Tanskanen. Sadat turvapaikanhakijat ovat kääntyneet kristityiksi – paluuta vanhaan kotimaahan ei ole. 26.7.2017.
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- YLE10. Antti Laakso. Kirkkoherra pöyristyi – maahanmuuttovirasto tyrmäsi todistuksen turvapaikanhakijoiden uskon aitoudesta. 29.1.2018.
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- YLE13. Kati Siponmaa. Turvapaikanhakijoita kääntyy kristinuskoon – halveksunnasta ja vaarasta piittaamatta. 7.1.2016.
- YLE14. Sannimari Lehtilä. Papeilta adressi sisäministeriölle – ”Asiantuntijuutemme turvapaikanhakijoista tulisi ottaa huomioon”. 6.9.2017.
- YLE15. Hanna Hanhinen. Matti Vanhanen eri mieltä presidentti Halosen kanssa: Kristinuskoon kääntyneetkin voidaan palauttaa. 22.4.2017.
- YLE16. Vesa Sundqvist and Ulla Malminen. Päivi Nerg turvapaikkakeskustelusta: Kristinuskon kääntymisen aitous on vaikea todentaa. 22.4.2017.

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- HS1. Liisa Niemi. Herttoniemessä kokoontuu maanantaisin irakilaismiesten rippikouluryhmä – yhä useamman kielteisen turvapaikkapäätöksen saaneet kääntyvät kristinuskoon. 8.10.2017
- HS2. Marjo Valtavaara. “Oman pojan” pakkopalatus kuohuttaa Kemijärven seurakuntaa: Kristityksi kääntyminen ei tuonut turvapaikkaa iranilaiselle Sardarille. 9.8.2019
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- HS7. Jarmo Huhtanen. Satoja turvapaikanhakijoita on liittynyt helluntaiseurakuntiin viime vuosina – Helluntaikirkon johtaja: ”Olemme joutuneet laittamaan jos nyt ei jarrun, niin ainakin kytkimen”. 23.10.2017
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- AL1. Jenna Keto-Tokoi. Moni turvapaikanhakija kääntyy kristinuskoon kielteisen päätöksen jälkeen – ”On vaikea arvioida, mikä on aitoa”. 3.10.2017.

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- SK2. Kaarina Heiskanen. Lukijalta: Rohkea kirkko puolustaa turvapaikanhakijaa. 28.8.2019.
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- IL2. Kirkkoherrat iloitsevat KHO:n päätöksestä kristinuskoon kääntyneen turvapaikanhakijan tapauksessa: ”Uskoa on hankala mitata”. 5.5.2019
- IL3. Näin Migri testaa kristityiksi kääntyneiden turvapaikanhakijoiden uskoa. 2.9.2017.
- IL4. Päivi Räsänen: kristityiksi kääntyneitä turvapaikanhakijoita ei saa lähettää kotimaihinsa. 22.8.2019.
- IL5. Turvapaikanhakija kääntyi kristityksi ja kertoi siitä Afganistaniin – sitten KHO kumosi Migrin ja hallinto-oikeuden kielteisen päätöksen vainon perusteella. 4.5.2019.
- IL6. Mika Koskinen. Pääkirjoitus: KHO:n ennakkopäätös kristityksi kääntyneen turvapaikanhakijan asiassa herättää kysymyksiä. 5.5.2019.
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TS1. No author information. Turvapaikanhakijoita kääntyy kristityiksi. 4.11.2015.

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Länsi-Suomi

LS1. Joosua Lehtinen. Oikeus ei uskonut, että Amir on kristitty, ja nyt hänet halutaan lähettää takaisin Afganistaniin – ”Olen varma, että kuolen kolmessa tai neljässä päivässä”. 9.8.2018.

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